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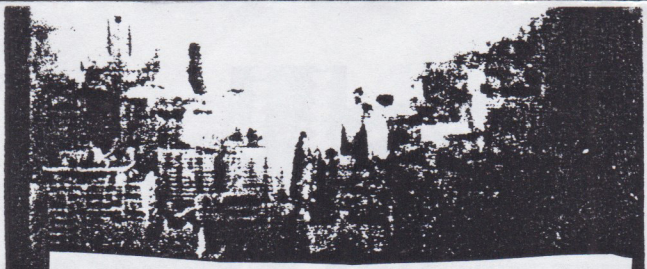
GHOST PINE FANZINE no. 6



THIS ISSUE TOOK TWO YEARS TO WRITE. I WORKED ON IT IN THE OLD COURTHOUSE I BABYSAT, ON PLANES OVER THE PACIFIC, AT THE COTTAGE MY GRANDFATHER BUILT ON OTTY LAKE, ON TOP A HEATED TABLE IN A SUBURB OF TOKYO, IN A SCUZZY GUESTHOUSE IN CHIANG MAI, IN A TRAILER ON THE BANKS OF THE RIDEAU RIVER, ON RORI AND YUMIKO'S FUTON IN KYOTO, AND IN THE BACK OF A BLUE CARGO VAN ROLLING ACROSS MICHIGAN. ¶ THANKS ARE DUE TO JON GEORGEKISHWAH FOR ALMOST PROOFREADING, JESSE B. STANIFORTH FOR BEING MY MONTREAL FACT CHECKER AND WRITING THE ROCK N ROLL QUOTE, HARRY MILLER (R.I.P.) FOR GIVING ME THE ONLY WRITING ADVICE I'VE EVER HAD, MEMERE FOR FEEDING ME ALL WEEK LONG AT HER OLD FOLKS HOME, AND MOST OF ALL THANKS TO CHRIS KISS AND JENN LENTON FOR SILK SCREENING ENVELOPES, WIPING MY NOSE AND DOING A HELL OF A LOT MORE OVER THE YEARS. ¶ ANYONE KNOWING THE WHEREABOUTS OF ADAM SCHACHHUBER PLEASE GET IN TOUCH. ¶ THIS FANZINE COSTS $2 POST PAID TO ANYWHERE, COPIES OF OTAKU #5 ARE STILL AVAILABLE, FOR THE SAME PRICE. TO ORDER ZINES OR GET IN TOUCH: 114 CANTER BLVD NEPEAN, ON / K2G-2M7 / CANADA. ¶ THIS ONE IS FOR THE SURVIVORS.

NEPEAN, 19/9/2001.

Jeff

IT WAS SPRING AGAIN IN MY HOMETOWN. ARSON STALKED OTTAWA, BUILDINGS IN EVERY CORNER OF THE CITY GOING UP IN SMOKE. ONE MOONLESS NIGHT A HOMELESS MAN WAS THROWN OFF THE HUNDRED FOOT CLIFF NEAR GOOD COMPANIONS, THE PAPER REPORTED EVERY BONE HAD BROKEN. AT THE CITY BUS YARDS A MECHANIC, TIRED OF BEING TEASED, TOOK OUT HIS FRUSTRATIONS WITH A SHOTGUN. WHEN POLICE ARRIVED FIVE BODIES LAY FELLED ON THE OIL STAINED TARMAC, INCLUDING THAT OF THE GUNMAN. OTTAWANS WERE TAKING THEIR POST-CABIN FEVER DEMENTIA TO THE STREETS AS NEVER BEFORE. IN THE CRACK BETWEEN SEASONS MELTED FROM IT'S DEEP FREEZE, SUCCUMBING TO A BLAZE OF SPONTANEOUS COMBUSTION.

FACED WITH TUMULT, CLIFF DECIDED IT WAS A GOOD TIME TO CLEAN OUT HIS BACK SHED, SORTING THE USEFUL DETRITUS FROM THE RUSTED DEBRIS. SOMEWHERE IN THE RUBBLE HE FOUND GRACE, THE REAL HEROINE OF THIS STORY, ALWAYS BY MY SIDE, EVEN WHEN I DON'T MENTION HER BY NAME. THERE SHE WAS, STILL AS SLIM, QUICK, AND SPRY AS HER NAME IMPLIED. CLIFF LOOKED HER OVER, DRAGGED HER FREE OF THE RUST PILE, AND GAVE ME A CALL.

CLIFF WAS MY STUDENT, HE HAD BUT ONE CLASS TO FINISH BEFORE HE COULD RECEIVE HIS DIPLOMA, THE DREADED O.A.C. ENGLISH. HE TRIED TO LEARN AND I TRIED TO TEACH HIM, BUT OUR WEEKLY TUTORING SESSIONS IMPLODED ALMOST IMMEDIATELY, AND OVER SOMETHING AS PETTY AS PAYMENT. SEE, HE PAID ME FOR EACH SESSION WITH ONE OF THE LUKEWARM 40S OF MALT LIQUOR HE ALWAYS CARRIED IN HIS BACK PACK.

"OKAY, LIST THREE OCCURENCES OF THE STONE ANGEL MOTIF IN MARGARET LAURENCE'S NOVEL..."

CLIFF LOOKED OUT MY BEDROOM WINDOW. AFTER THE LONG, GREY WINTER THE WORLD WAS BACK, IN BRIGHT GREENS AND BLUES. "DO YOU WANT TO DRINK THOSE NOW?" HE ASKED, POINTING TO HIS BAG.

"YES."

AS CLIFF DRANK, HIS EYES GLOWED. EVERYONE WAS TALKING,

ABOUT THEM, GREEN AND DEEP. HE HID HIMSELF IN STRETCHED OUT SHIRTS AND UNDER A BLACK MAT OF HAIR, BUT HIS EYES BURNED THROUGH THE DIRT, PULLING PEOPLE IN. HE WAS THE MYSTERY EVERYONE WANTED TO UNRAVEL.

THAT SPRING I WAS ASKED THE SAME QUESTION SO MANY TIMES I LOST COUNT: "SO WHO'S YOUR NEW FRIEND?"

"THAT'S CLIFF, FROM THE WEST SIDE."

"HE'S GOT REALLY NICE..."

"EYES. YEAH, I KNOW."

"IS HE...?"

"NO. HE'S NOT HALF JAPANESE PURE BRED IRISH."

IN THE VALLEY I'M FROM SPRING IS BARELY A SEASON. THE CLEAR, WARM DAYS ARE INTERRUPTED BY FREAK BLIZZARDS WHICH STRIKE AS LATE AS JUNE. FREAK HEATWAVES HIT AS EARLY AS MARCH. THIS YEAR WINTER HUNG ON AND THE FADE INTO SPRING HEARTBREAKINGLY SLOW. THEN ONE DAY I WOKE UP TO FIND STAGNANT AIR, A SKY THE COLOUR OF A DIRTY T-SHIRT, AND ACTS OF VIOLENCE AND ARSON FADING TO THE BACKGROUND. MY HAIR BEGAN TO CURL, SUMMER HAD ARRIVED, EARLIER THAN EXPECTED.

ME AND GRACE RODE THROUGH THE THICK OF TRAFFIC, ESCAPING MURDEROUS AUTOMOBILES. WE BIKED DOWNTOWN EVERYDAY, SPEEDING THROUGH RED LIGHTS AT THE HEIGHT

OF RUSH HOUR TRAFFIC, AND LIVED TO TELL THE TALE. ME AND GRACE WERE NEVER APART AND I ADMIT IT, I LOVED HER, STILL DO IN FACT. WHO CARES IF SHE'S JUST A WHITE TEN-SPEED BUILT FOR THIRTEEN YEAR OLD GIRLS?

SUMMER DAYS FIND SUBURBAN STREETS EMPTY, VACANT OF ALL SIGNS OF LIFE. INHABITANTS RETREAT TO THEIR AIR CONDITIONED HOMES AS THE OTTAWA VALLEY HEAT AND HUMIDITY TURNED FRESHLY CLEANED UNDERWARE INTO A FETID SWAMP UPON WEARING THEM OUTSIDE. BIKING DOWNTOWN I PASSED THROUGH PLEASURE PARK WHERE STREETS SWELL AND WINDOWS FLING OPEN HIP HOP HEADS SMOKED DOPE AND FREESTYLED BEHIND THE COMMUNITY CENTER. KIDS JOCKEYED FOR POSITION ON THE CROWDED LADDER OF THE SLIDE. ACROSS THE STREET OLD FOLKS RELAXED, SITTING IN FOLDING CHAIRS ON THE LAWN OF THEIR 20 FLOOR APARTMENT TOWER. ARGUING IN FRENCH, CREOLE, AND HINDI, SPEAKERS OFTEN SWITCHING FROM ONE TO THE OTHER. DOWN THE BLOCK, ACROSS FROM THE CONVENIENCE STORE, A POLICEMAN SAT ALONE IN HIS CRUISER. WINDOWS UP, AIR CONDITIONING ON FULL BLAST.

"WE WERE RUNNING AROUND MILE END AND DAMN IF IT DIDN'T SEEM LIKE THE WHOLE CITY WAS OUT. HANGING OFF BALCONIES, DRINKIN' COFFEE ON THE PATIOS,"

MANNY WAS GETTING WHIPPED UP JUST TELLING THE TALE.

"THEN," CLIFF SAID, "WE WENT TO THE PARK WHERE THEY DRUM, UNDER THE MOUNTAIN. HUNDREDS OF PEOPLE WERE MILLING AROUND SOME KIDS BUILT A HUGE BONFIRE OUT OF BURNING TRASH. ONE GUY STARTED YELLING 'BRING ON THE RIOT.' BRING ON THE RIOT.' IN FRENCH AND THEN WE ALL START YELLING. A COP HELICOPTER TRAINED A SPOTLIGHT ON US, AND THEN," HE PAUSED FOR EFFECT, "FOUR CITY BUSES PULL UP FILLED WITH COPS IN RIOT GEAR, BATONS OUT.'"

"AND JUST LIKE THAT," SAID MANNY WITH A GLINT OF MISCHIEF IN HIS EYE, "INSTANT RIOT.' PEOPLE SCREAMING, RUNNING INTO THE WOODS, UP THE MOUNTAIN, PELTING THE PIGS WITH BOTTLES. WE BARELY ESCAPED.'"

I FINALLY MANAGED TO VISIT MANNY IN MONTREAL, AND BY THE SOUNDS OF IT, MISSED THE BEST PARTY OF THE YEAR. THIS WAS A GOOD THING, I CONSOLED MYSELF, SINCE I CAME UP FOR SOME PEACE AND QUIET. CLIFF WAS THERE FOR THE SAME REASON, BUT HE HAD A KNACK FOR GETTING TANGLED UP IN THINGS.

FOR THE THIRD YEAR RUNNING TENSIONS BETWEEN HIM AND HIS PARENTS BOILED OVER HE LEFT HOME, VOWING NEVER TO RETURN. PREVIOUS YEARS HE SHAVED HIS SHAGGY COAL HAIR AND RETREAT INTO THE FOREST, WHERE HE ABSTAINED

FROM ALL EVIL TOXINS AND WORKED AS A COUNSELLOR AT A VEGETARIAN SUMMER CAMP HIDDEN DEEP IN THE QUEBEC WOODLAND. BUT THIS YEAR THERE WAS NO CAMP TO RUN TO. DEPENDING ON WHO YOU TALKED TO THE OWNERS WERE EITHER TAKING A WELL DESERVED BREAK, OR FENDING OFF AN AUDIT BY REVENUE CANADA.

THIS YEAR IT LOOKED LIKE CLIFF WAS IN THE COLD COLD WORLD FOR GOOD. HE NEVER GOT THAT HIGH SCHOOL DIPLOMA.

IF CLIFF'S EYES WERE HIS MOST DISTINCT FEATURE THEN CHRIS HANDS WERE HIS. THOSE BIG FRECKLED PAWS WERE ALWAYS OCCUPIED, PLAYING BASS, DRIVING HIS BEAT UP SPORTSCAR, AND DRAWING THUMBNAIL PORTRAITS ON NAPKINS. BUT MOSTLY HE SMOKED, HOLDING A CANCER STICK IN HIS RIGHT HAND AT ALL TIMES. HE EXHALED IN MY FACE.

"OUR BAND HAS TO START WRITING SONGS THE WAY GRAFFITI GROWS ON BATHROOM WALLS," HE PAUSED TO INHALE "OTHERWISE WE WON'T GET ANYTHING DONE. NAW MEAN?" WE SAT DRINKING COFFEE AT MIDNIGHT TIRED AND HYPER, AT A DINER IN THE SUBURBS.

CHRIS HAD BEEN SMOKING SINCE THE AGE OF TWELVE, AND BY NOW HE WAS REALLY GOOD AT IT. WE BUILT CONVERSATIONS AROUND HIS PAUSES. DISCUSS. INHALE. STOP TO THINK. DRIVE THE POINT HOME. EXHALE IN TRIUMPH. HE USED THE ORANGE TIP AS BULLETS,

LISTING HIS THOUGHTS AS THEY WERE ISSUED, RAPID FIRE FROM HIS COFFEE ENHANCED BRAIN.

CHRIS WAS AFRAID OF HEIGHTS SO HE WAITED PATIENTLY BELOW AS I CLIMBED EVERY ACCESS ELEVATOR IN THE NEIGHBOURHOOD I EXPLORED FLAT PEBBLE TOPPED ROOFS, FINDING WALLS COVERED IN MARIJUANA INSPIRED GRAFFITI, ALWAYS A POT LEAF AND AN EARNEST 'LEGALISE IT'. ONE NIGHT I STOOD IN FRONT OF THE SUPER-MARKET AIR VENTS SMELLING THE BAKERY'S OVENS DOWNSTAIRS.

I THOUGHT SEEING THE OLD NEIGHBOURHOOD FROM HIGH UP WOULD SHOW ME SOMETHING I'D NEVER SEEN BEFORE, BUT FROM UP HIGH EVERYTHING LOOKED THE SAME. JUST BECAUSE I WAS BORN HERE DOESN'T MEAN I SHOULD DIE HERE I THOUGHT. SOMETHING HAD TO CHANGE.

ONE DAY MANNY SHOWED UP, GUITAR IN TOW. HE ASKED ME "DO YOU WANT TO MOVE TO MONTREAL, LIVE IN MY NEW PLACE?"

I SMILED AND SAID "SURE."

THE WHEELS CLICKED OVER GROOVES EVERY THREE SECONDS. THE VAN, WEIGHED DOWN IN THE BACK, BOUNCED IN TIME. AS MANNY AND I CROSSED THE ST. LAWRENCE RIVER TO MONTREAL ISLAND MY WATCH READ JUST PAST SIX P.M. AND A LATE SUMMER SKY BURNED LOW IN THE WEST.

THE SUN IS ALSO GETTING LOW OVER THE FRENCH VESSEL SAINT NICHOLAS, CREEKING DOWN THE RIVER WITH ILE STE HELENE IN FULL VIEW AHEAD. WHITECAPS DOT THE RIVER, IT'S LATE SEPTEMBER AND WINTER IS ALREADY MAKING IT'S PRESENCE FELT. ON DECK KNEELS A MAN, ALL OF EIGHTEEN YEARS OLD, HIS HEAD HANGING OVER THE PORT SIDE. 'TWO GOD DAMN MONTHS,' HE'S THINKING, 'ON THIS BOAT IN THE ATLANTIC.' IT BARELY HELD TOGETHER. AND IT LOOKS LIKE HE'S BARELY HELD TOGETHER TOO. HE HOLDS HIS

STOMACH, BUT FEW SAILORS ON DECK GIVE HIM THE SYMPATHETIC LOOKS HE'S FISHING FOR. MOST WATCH THE NORTH SHORE, WAITING EXCITEDLY.

"MAYBE FIVE YEARS IS LONG ENOUGH TO PUT THAT GIRL OUT OF MY MIND," HE MUMBLES TO HIMSELF, LAMENTING ANOTHER BROKEN HEART. A NEARBY SAILOR INVOLUNTARILY LISTENING TO THE MAN'S MUMBLINGS HEARS SOMETHING TO THE EFFECTS OF "MY BEST FRIEND STOLE MY GIRL, MAN I WAS HUMILIATED ALL THE WAY ACROSS THE OCEAN BLUE. SHIT."

THE COLONY COMES INTO VIEW SLOWLY, LIKE A DEVELOPING POLAROID. A WOODEN FORT A SMALL HOSPITAL THAT DOUBLES FOR A CHURCH AND, FURTHER UP THE HILL, A SMALL WOODEN CHALET ENCASED BY TALL WALLS. "THAT'S IT?" ONE SAILOR NOTED HIS DISAPPOINTMENT. OTHERS ON BOARD MANAGE MORE ENTUSIASM AND SOON EVERYONE IS YELLING AND CHEERING. THE DOORS OF THE FORT BURST FORWARD, THE RESIDENTS JOG TO THE POINT, RETURNING THE SHIP'S CALL. ONE WOMAN REPEATEDLY YELLS 'BIENVENUE' AND ARYTMICALLY BEATS A BLACK SKILLET WITH A SPOON AS THE SHIP LUMBERS TO THE LANDING AT POINTE A CALLIERE.

THE MUMBLING MAN ON THE PORT SIDE STANDS SLOWLY TAKING IN THE VIEW OF THE ISLAND. A BLANKET OF GREEN

COVERING EVERYTHING, FROM THE FOOT OF THE RIVER TO THE MOUNTAIN HIGH IN THE DISTANCE. THE BOAT LURCHES AS JAGGED WAVES BEAT THE SIDE, AND THE MAN'S STOMACH TURNS AGAIN. HE BENDS, AND FINALLY PUKES HIS GUTS OUT INTO THE RIVER. THE YEAR IS 1653, THE COLONY IS VILLE MARIE, NOW KNOWN AS MONTREAL, AND THE MAN, MUMBLING AND PUKING, IS JEAN GERVAIS, MY OLDEST KNOWN RELATIVE. ONCE ASHORE HE ACTUALLY LIVED THE CLICHE AND KISSED THE GROUND. THE SHIPMATES STARED IN HORROR.

WHY AM I TELLING YOU THIS, THIS VAGUE FAMILY HISTORY? ONLY BECAUSE MY DAD WOULDN'T LET ME FORGET THE LOWER BRANCHES OF MY FAMILY TREE AS I PREPARED TO MOVE. "IF ANY OF THOSE BASTARDS GIVE YOU A HARD TIME YOU CAN TELL 'EM ALL TO GO TO HELL. YOU'RE AS PUR LAIN AS THEY COME!" HE WAS CONVINCED I WOULD BE LYNCHED BY AN UNRULY MOB OF SEPARATISTES AT MY FIRST UTTERANCE OF ENGLISH.

TO MY FATHER I WASN'T JUST MOVING ONTO GREENER PASTURES. INSTEAD I WAS DISPOSSESSED QUEBECOIS RETURNING TO WHAT CARTIER CALLED 'THE LAND OF CAIN' MY ANCESTRAL HOME AND MY BIRTHRIGHT.

"I WATCHED A TRAIN SET THE NIGHT ON FIRE." MY POGUES TAPE WAS SPITTING OUT THE VAN'S TINY STEREO AS WE HIT THE OUTSKIRTS. THE ROADSIDE LITTERED WITH SQUAT BUILDINGS OF CONCRETE AND CHROME, HOLDING THE HEAD QUARTERS OF PHARMACEUTICAL MANUFACTURERS AND FAILED COMPUTER RELATED BUSINESS. LARGE BILLBOARDS RUB AGAINST THE HIGHWAY, ADVERTISING KOREAN AUTOMOBILES, CANADIAN DONUT STORES AND MORE THAN A DOZEN DIFFERENT BRANDS OF LIQUOR

CLOSER TO THE CITY WE PASS THE FREIGHT YARD, A MINIATURE CITY BUILT OF GIANT LEGO BLOCKS LABELLED "CPR" OR "CN", WITH INDECIPHERABLE NUMBERS ACROSS THE SIDE. LONG TRAINS SLINK SLOWLY BACK AND FORTH ABOUT THE CHAOTIC YARD, TAKING ORDERS FROM A BLUE AND WHITE STRIPED CONTROL TOWER IN THE CENTER

"I MET MY LOVE BY THE GAS WORKS WALL." THE AUTOROUTE RISES HIGHER AND HIGHER UNTIL WE CAN SEE THE WHOLE SOUTH-WEST OF THE ISLAND. WE CATCH BRIEF GLIMPSES OF PEOPLE'S LIVES THROUGH THEIR WINDOWS, FRAMED LIKE A PHOTOGRAPH.

"DREAMED A DREAM BY THE OLD CANAL" MANNY ANDI SANG AS WE DROVE PAST THE OLD CANAL AND ADJACENT ABANDONNED FACTORIES, PAST EIGHTY FOOT TALL TREES AND STOREFRONTS

FILLED WITH ONLY 'LOCAL A LOUER' SIGNS. WE PULLED UP TO OUR NEW APARTMENT AND SAT IN THE VAN FOR A WHILE, MANNY FLICKS OFF THE TAPE AND WE SAT IN SILENCE

AT THE END OF THE STREET, FIFTEEN FEET FROM OUR FRONT DOOR, SAT TWO THICK WHITE CONCRETE PILLARS, SUPPORTING THE HUMMING ROADWAY SEVENTY FEET ABOVE. OUR NEW HOUSE: THE LAST ON A DEAD END STREET, ON THE WRONG SIDE OF THE AQUADUC AND THE WRONG SIDE OF THE TRACKS, A DOZEN FEET FROM BEING DIRECTLY BENEATH THE AUTOROUTE. AS THE SUNLIGHT FADED MANNY PULLED HIS KEY FROM THE IGNITION. NIGHT TOOK OVER.

ON AND OFF IT FLICKERED, THE NEON SIGN ACROSS THE STREET, A BULLDOG TAKING A PISS OVER AND OVER, A COLUMN OF YELLOW NEON BLINKING IN THE NIGHT.

"I'M SO SICK OF THIS EIGHTIES RETRO BULLSHIT!" ADA FUMED AS THE MUSIC SEEPED THROUGH THE WALLS OF THE DOG. PISS BAR. THE DOG NOW RELIEVING ITSELF TO THE BEAT OF '1999' BY PRINCE. "TURN IT DOWN!" ADA YELLED TO NO RESPONSE.

EMILY, SITTING AT THE KITCHEN TABLE CONTINUED HER STORY. "I'M GOING TO GET SICK OF IT, BUT IT'LL BE WORTH IT, BEING UP THERE IN THOSE BIG RIGS WITH THE LADIES OF THE ROAD. I'VE GOT TWO RIDES SET UP, ONE FROM PORTLAND TO L.A., THEN ACROSS THE DESSERT TO TUCSON." HER EXTENSIVE FALL TRAVEL PLANS WERE DEVOTED ENTIRELY TO HER RESEARCH INTO THE LIVES OF WOMEN TRUCKERS.

AFTER MOVING MY PALTRY POSSESSIONS INTO THE APARTMENT WE HOPPED ACROSS TOWN TO PICK UP MANNY'S GEAR. AS WE CARRIED HIS BOXES DOWN A FIRE ESCAPE WE WERE WATCHED BY A LINE OF SIX GIRLS ON THE ADJACENT ROOF.

"HEY" MANNY WAVED TO ONE WITH A FRESHLY SHAVEN HEAD, BEFORE THEY ALL DISAPPEARED INSIDE. THE VAN FULL, MANNY INSERTED THE KEY IN THE IGNITION, THEN PULLED IT OUT, SAYING "FUCK IT, THERE'S A PARTY GOING ON." WE PROCEEDED UP THE NEIGHBOURING FIRE ESCAPE.

"YOU GUYS MIND SESAME TOFU WITH BROCCOLI?" ASKED ADA, CALM IN THE MIDST OF COOKING A MEAL. ADA WAS THE GIRL MANNY WAVED TO, HIS NEIGHBOR FOR THE LAST FOUR MONTHS. EMILY AND THE OTHER GIRLS MILLING ABOUT WERE FRIENDS, VISITING FROM THE PACIFIC COAST. THEY WERE GETTING ANTSY.

"HOW LONG 'TIL DINNER?"

"THIS RECIPE TAKES AT LEAST AN HOUR..."

"I NEED TO TEST OUT MY NEW DOLLAR STORE BATHING CAP." ALL AGREED SOME SWIMMING WAS IN ORDER.

"I GOTTA STAY AND COOK THIS," ADA SAID AS THEY FILED OUT OF HER ROOM IN ONE PIECE BATHING SUITS. WE STAYED, I CUT BROCCOLI AND MANNY OFFERED TO DO DISHES. WE WERE TOO HUNGRY TO WAIT FOR THE SWIMMERS RETURN, SO WE SAT ON A FLATTENED CARDBOARD BOX

ON THE ROOF, EATING PLATE AFTER PLATE.

MANNY BEGAN WASHING DISHES. "HOT WATER SURE IS GREAT, HUH?" HE SAYS.

"HM," I AGREE PENSIVELY, ADA NODS.

"LAST TIME THIS YEAR THIS TIME I WAS BACK ON THE FARM," HE CONTINUES HIS TRAIN OF THOUGHT.

"YEAH, HOW WAS THAT?"

"WELL AT THE FARM ME AND HANA HAD BEEN LIVING IN THIS NICE OLD CAMPER VAN, IT WAS RESERVED FOR COUPLES, BUT WHEN SHE LEFT I WAS DEMOTED TO SLEEPING IN A CHICKEN COOP," HE SAID.

AT THE AGE OF SEVENTEEN MANNY TALKED HIS PARENTS INTO BELIEVING IT WAS A GOOD IDEA TO LET HIM HITCHHIKE TO WINNIPEG, A GOOD THOUSAND MILES DOWN THE ROAD. HIS TRAVELLING COMPANION WAS HANA, AN ANARCHIST A FULL FIVE YEARS OLDER THAN HE. THEY STARTED DOWN THE ROAD AS FRIENDS, BUT BY THE TIME THEY REACHED THE HALFWAY MARK AT THE ONTARIO-MANITOBA BORDER THEY WERE SOMETHING MORE. HANA SEDUCED MANNY AND HE LOST HIS VIRGINITY IN A TWO MAN PUP TENT IN WAWA. OR WAS IT KENORA? THE SOO? THE LAKEHEAD? ALL THOSE TRANS-CANADA TOWNS BLUR TOGETHER IN MY MIND. WHICHEVER TOWN IT WAS

THE FORESTS WERE DARK GREEN, THE ROCK FACES LIGHT PINK, AND THE DRIVES BETWEEN CITIES TAKE DAYS.

AFTER TWO YEARS OF HANGING OUT ON AND OFF, HANA TOOK OFF TO WORK ON THE FLORIDA COAST FOR AWHILE. BUT NOW AFTER A LONG SUMMER APART MANNY AND HER WERE GETTING BACK TO WHERE THEY FIRST FELL FOR EACH OTHER, THE ROAD.

"WE'RE GOING SOUTH DOWN THE ATLANTIC AND WORKING ON SOME ORGANIC FARMS ON THE WAY, WE'LL MISS HARVEST, THOUGH," HE EXPLAINED TO ME OVER TEA, THE DAY BEFORE HE LEFT TOWN. IT WAS A SOBER GOODBYE, SUMMER WAS OVER.

"I'LL BE BACK BY SPRING AND WE CAN TOUR, DON'T SWEAT IT."

WE SPENT MOST OF THE SPRING AND SUMMER TOGETHER WHILE HANA WAS AWAY. I WAS THE LOYAL ROADIE TO 'MANNY, MAN-SHOW' HIS ONE MAN BAND. HE PLAYED ALL MANNER OF FOLK AND PUNK TUNES, SONGS THAT MANAGED TO BE BOTH URGENT AND TIME-LESS. HIS GUITAR HAD A RED ANARCHY STICKER AND A FLIMSY PICK-UP, STUCK ON WITH BUBBLEGUM. OUT IN THE CROWD I SANG ALONG TO THE JOHN DENVER SONG "COUNTRY ROADS TAKE ME HOME."

SINGING ALONG WAS BUT

ONE OF MY DUTIES, I ALSO LUGGED AROUND THE HEAVY ROADCASE AND SECURED OUR MEANS OF TRANSPORTATION, BY STICKING OUT MY THUMB. THE PLAN WAS TO AVOID CITIES AND 400 SERIES HIGHWAYS, STICKING TO THE BACK ROADS. WE WERE BLAZING A TRAIL ACROSS THE OTTAWA VALLEY AND THE ST. LAWRENCE SEAWAY, MAKING FRIENDS WITH FARMERS AND TOWNIES. WE WERE EVENTUALLY GOING TO STAY OUT FOR WHOLE SEASONS, DOING RESEARCH IN THE LIBRARIES BY DAY AND PLAYING ON A DIFFERENT PORCH EVERY NIGHT.

IN THE END WE ONLY MANAGED TO THE CAFES, YOUTH CENTRES, AND BASEMENTS OF HALF A DOZEN TOWNS.

MANNY AND HANA'S TRIP SUFFERED THE SAME FATE AS OUR TOUR. THEY MADE IT AS FAR AS AN ANARCHIST FARM OUTSIDE OF PORTLAND, MAINE BEFORE SHE GOT COLD FEET AND PARTED WAYS THIS TIME FOR GOOD. HANA FOLLOWED THROUGH WITH THEIR PLAN, WHICH WAS REALLY HER PLAN, AND WENT TO MEXICO. MANNY STAYED IN MAINE UNTIL THE HARVEST WAS IN.

IN ADA'S KITCHEN MANNY IS SMILING, OR MAYBE WINCING, "YEAH IT WAS ORIGINALLY A CHICKEN COOP. IT'D BEEN RENOVATED SO THE WIND COULDN'T GET IN, BUT IT DID,

AND IT WAS OCTOBER, PRETTY DRAUGHTY. ME AND HANA'D PLANNED TO BE IN MEXICO BY THEN SO I ONLY HAD A SUMMER SLEEPING BAG. EVERY MORNING I WOKE UP AND THE WALLS WERE DRIPPING CONDENSATION AND I COULD SEE MY BREATH."

MANNY GRABBED A WOK FROM THE SINK AND BEGAN TO SCRUB. "I REMEMBER ONE WEEK AT THE TAIL END OF HARVEST I GOT STUCK WITH DISHWASHING DUTY IN THE KITCHEN. THERE WAS NO HOT WATER AND TO CONSERVE ENERGY THE FARM'S POWER WENT OUT AT SIX P.M. THERE WERE STACKS AND STACKS OF DISHES, SO I ALWAYS ENDED UP BUSTING SUDS WITH COLD WATER, IN THE DARK.

HE TURNED ON AN ELEMENT ON THE STOVE TO DRY THE WOK.

"SOUNDS ROUGH," SAID ADA.

"YEAH... ROUGH," MANNY SAID, AS IF REALIZING IT FOR THE FIRST TIME.

"HEY MANNY," I PIPE UP. "D'YA EVER THINK ABOUT SHACKIN' UP WITH HANA FOR A WHILE BEFORE YOU TOOK OFF ON YOUR TRIP. NOT LIVING IN THE SAME HOUSE, BUT AT LEAST THE SAME CITY. I MEAN SHE'D BEEN AWAY A PRETTY LONG TIME, AND THE ROAD AINT ALWAYS THE BEST PLACE TO GET REACQUAINTED."

"HM," MANNY LOOKED AT ME THOUGHTFULLY. HE PICKED UP

THE DRY WOK, TURNED OFF THE STOVE, AND STACKED IT ON TOP OF THE RACK OF DRYING DISHES. "I NEED SOME CIGARETTES." HE SAID AS HE WALKED TO THE FIRE ESCAPE. ADA AND I WATCHED THE PRECARIOUSLY PLACED WOK WOBBLE AND SHIVER, HITTING THE KITCHEN FLOOR AS MANNY HIT THE STREET.

THE PROBLEM WITH FALLING IN LOVE WITH A TRAVELLER IS EASY TO FIGURE OUT. THEY KEEP MOVING EVEN AFTER THEY'VE SWORN YOU THEIR HEART. YOU BECOME ANOTHER TOWN WITH A FUNNY NAME THEY CAN SAY THEY'VE BEEN OR A CITY SHE'S ANXIOUS TO LEAVE, A STIFLING NEIGHBOURHOOD A FEW THOUSAND MILES BACK, DISAPPEARING FAST FROM HER REARVIEW MIRROR.

ACROSS THE STREET THE DOG PISS FLICKERED ON AND OFF.

JEFF, I MISS HIM SO MUCH," SHE POUTED FOR THE SEVENTH TIME IN A ROW.

I LOOKED UP AT HER FROM WHERE I HAD BEEN SLEEPING ON THE FLOOR. MY EYES WERE STILL CRUSTED OVER. SHE WAS SITTING ON HER UNMADE BED WEARING PYJAMAS WITH HEARTS AND CARTOON BEARS ACROSS THE FRONT, HER HAIR SHOOTING IN EVERY DIRECTION.

"FUCK YOU. I CAN'T BELIEVE YOU WOKE ME UP JUST TO TELL ME YOU MISS YOUR BOYFRIEND." CHRIS WAS VISITING HIS SISTER OVERSEAS FOR A MONTH AND SYLVIA HAD DECIDED TO LOSE HER MIND OVER IT. SHE WAS HOUSE SITTING A THREE STORY MANSION FOR THE MONTH BEFORE I MOVED TO MONTREAL. I MOVED IN TO KEEP HER DISTRACTED AND LUCKILY I WASN'T ALONE, SQUATTING RIGHTS WERE CLAIMED ON EACH ROOM, UNTIL EVERY HABITABLE CLOSET AND CRAWL

SPACE WAS OCCUPIED BY A LONG, LOST FRIEND

"YOU'RE SAD," WERE THE FIRST WORDS I SPOKE TO SYLVIA. WE MET ON THE SCHOOLBUS AND SHE HAD THE LOOKS OF A REAL MOROSE CHILD, A HANGDOG EXPRESSION AND BIG, POUTING LIPS THAT NEVER CRINKLED INTO A SMILE. SHE SAT NEXT TO ME COMPLETELY SILENT EVERY DAY FOR THE WHOLE YEAR.

"HE'S IN AUSTRALIA, I HEARD A SONG ON THE RADIO THAT SAID 'MEN PLUNDER IN THE LAND DOWN UNDER.' NOW I MISS HIM AND I WORRY ABOUT HIS LOYALTY"

"I MISS SLEEP. LET'S GET BREAKFAST."

SHE NODDED.

DOWNSTAIRS A SEVEN FOOT CARROT TOP BOY STOOD IN FRONT OF THE STOVE, EVERY ELEMENT BURNING RED HOT. HOMEFRIES WITH ONIONS, AND MUSHROOMS SIZZLED IN SEPERATE PANS, BARLEY SOUP BUBBLED IN A POT, AND BEST OF ALL, PANCAKES WERE SINGING IN THE GRIDDLE.

THE CHEF WORE NOTHING, BUT LIGHT BROWN FRECKLES, RED SCRAPES FROM A BIKE ACCIDENT ON PRESTON STREET, AND A PAIR OF TIGHT YELLOW JOCKEYS.

"BREAKFAST," HE SCREAMED DANCING AROUND THE ROOM FLIPPING FLAPJACKS.

RICHIE WAS AN OLD FRIEND OF CLIFF'S FROM THE HIPPIE PUNK SUMMER CAMP. WHEN I MET HIM HE WAS DOING TIME IN TORONTO

IN A COLLAPSING HOUSE FILLED WITH ANARCHISTS AND GARDEN VARIETY MISCREANTS. HE HANDED ME A VEGGIE BURGER IN THE CROWDED KITCHEN. "THAT," HE POINTED TO MY BURGER, "IS WHY I NEVER HAVE TO SPEND ANY OF MY HARD EARNED WELFARE CHEQUE ON RENT. HA."

HE COOKED TWO ENORMOUS MEALS A DAY FOR THE HOUSE WITH FOOD FROM THE OVERFLOWING FOOD NOT BOMBS DONATIONS ON THE PORCH. USING THIS WELL HONED SCAM RICHIE SCORED FREE LODGING IN A LONG SERIES OF HOUSES. OUR TEMPORARY HOUSEHOLD WAS THE LATEST TO FALL FOR HIS CULINARY CHARMS.

AS I ATE I WATCH THE WASPS HANGING OUTSIDE THE WINDOW, LOOKING FOR SOME PLACE WARM.

I WATCHED SYLVIA AND THOUGHT OF THE NIGHT LAST MONTH I SHOWED UP AT HER HOUSE UNINVITED. I RANG THE BELL AT FOUR A.M. ASKING TIMIDLY "DO YOU HAVE ANY POLYSPORIN?" STANDING ON HER STOOP THE PORCH LIGHT REVEALED BLOOD DRIPPING DOWN MY NECK, TURNING MY T-SHIRT A DARK BROWN

"OH JESUS," SHE DRAGGED ME INTO THE BATHROOM TO FIND GAUZE AND I NEARLY FAINTED WHEN I SAW THE LEFTSIDE OF MY CHIN HANGING FROM MY FACE. "YOU'RE IN SHOCK," SHE SAID

CHRIS EMERGED FROM THE BASEMENT. "MAKE HIM DRINK

THIS APPLE-JUICE SO HIS BLOOD SUGAR LEVEL DOESN'T FALL. CHANGE HIS DRESSING IF IT GETS SATURATED," SHE SHOUTED AS SHE RODE OFF TO MY PARENTS HOUSE ON MY CRUMPLED BIKE. AS WE WAITED FOR MY FATHER TO WHISK ME AWAY TO THE HOSPITAL CHRIS PACED. "WOW ... SHIT DUDE. ARE YOU... O.K.?" I GAVE HIM A BIG THUMBS UP, LYING.

I FELL OFF MY BIKE, HITTING SOME DEBRIS IN THE ROAD AS I SPED DOWN THE SLOPE OF A BRIDGE AT FORTY MILES PER HOUR. I SKIDDED TEN FEET ON MY CHIN AND BUSTED UP MY LEFT HAND. THEN I GOT UP AND BIKED FOR FORTY FIVE MINUTES, SWERVING THROUGH INDUSTRIAL PARK BACKSTREETS. I ONLY STOPPED AT SYLVIA'S BECAUSE I KNEW SHE COULD GIVE ME SOMETHING TO PUT ON MY HAND BEFORE I WENT TO SLEEP.

THIRTEEN STITCHES AND TWO WEEKS LATER I WAS REPAYING THE DEBT. TRYING TO ANYWAY. SYLVIA ALWAYS CALLED US 'THE FAMILY' HER AND CHRIS AND ME. WE STUCK TOGETHER WHEN EVERYONE ELSE WAS SICK OF US. WE BOUGHT EACH OTHER DRINKS IN A CYCLE, BECAUSE WE ALL WERE WAITING ON DIFFERENT PAY CHEQUES. WE WATCHED FOREIGN FILMS IN OUR PARENTS BASEMENTS. WE DRANK COFFEE AND READ THE PAPER, BUT MOSTLY WE BLEW SMOKE AND DROVE AROUND IN CHRIS' CAR, AIMLESS

BUT TOGETHER.

THE ONLY REGULAR RESIDENT LEFT AT THE HOUSE-SIT WAS NOEL, A SMALL BROWN DACHSHUND. HE SAT ON MY LAP CONTENTEDLY AS I RUBBED HIS HEAD, LISTENING TO THE NIGHT CREEP UP ON ALL SIDES, THE CICADAS DYING DOWN AND THE CARS ON BANK STREET LIKE A RUSHING RIVER.

AS SUMMER TURNS TO FALL NIGHTS GET LONGER AND COOLER, AND THE SUPEREX COMES TO TOWN. SOME TOWNS HAVE CARNIVALS IN JUNE OR JULY, AND THEY ARE FULL ON BLOW OUTS OF ADOLESCENT ABANDON. NOT SO IN OTTAWA, THE SUPEREX IS PERENIALLY REFERRED TO BY NEWSCASTERS AND PARENTS AS THE LAST CHANCE FOR SUMMER FUN AND THUS BECOMES A GRIM WAKE FOR FREEDOM AND POOL PARTIES, FUCKING IN PARKS AND WASTED DAYS. AS THE MIDWAY ARRIVES AT LANSDOWNE PARK KIDS ARE TORMENTED WITH THE REALISATIONS THAT THEY STILL HAVENT POPPED ECSTASY, FELT UP THE GIRL THEY HAVE A CRUSH ON, LEARNED TO POP AN OLLIE, OR DONE MUCH OF ANYTHING OVER THE LAST SEVENTY DAYS. THE MIDWAY SITS BELOW THE ORIGINAL LIVESTOCK EXHIBITION BUILDING, THE CATTLE CASTLE, TILT-O-WHIRLS, DOUBLE FERRIS WHEELS, AND HAUNTED HOUSES ARE PUNCTUATED OVERPRICED COTTON CANDY STALLS, CROOKED RING TOSS, AND UBIQUITOUS BLUE PORT-O-POTTIES.

FOR TEN DAYS IN AUGUST THE KIDS AMASS HERE, ENDING SORDID TWO MONTH LONG RELATIONSHIPS (ADMITING LATER IN THE GIRL'S WASHROOM THAT IT "FELT LIKE A LIFETIME) AND HAVING THE WORST ACID TRIPS OF THEIR YOUNG LIVES.

THE FAIRGROUNDS WERE ONLY A BLOCK FROM OUR ADOPTED HOME. EVERY NIGHT WE WOULD ARRIVE ON THE BACK PATIO WITH A BOTTLE OF SOMETHING, BUT SOON ENOUGH OUR CONVERSATION WOULD LAPSE AND THE BACKYARD WOULD HUSH. THE ONLY SOUND WAS THE KIDS DOWN THE BLOCK, SCREAMING THEIR GUTS OUT ON THE RIDES OR IN FRONT OF THE MAINSTAGE WHERE REUNITED HAIR METAL BANDS PLAYED TO BOISTEROUS TEENS. LAME ROCK 'N' ROLL COULD BE HEARD ALL ACROSS TOWN AS IT REVERBERATED OFF THE LOW HANGING CLOUDS.

OF THE THREE PEOPLE I KNEW WHO LIVED IN MONTREAL I FOUND RICHIE FIRST. HE WAS FRESHLY MOVED INTO HIS NEW APARTMENT AND WE HAD A JOYOUS REUNION OVER SALAD. WE PLANNED OUR NEW RITUAL. MONDAY NIGHT WAS GARBAGE NIGHT IN THE NATION'S MOST CULTURED NEIGHBOURHOOD, AND WE WOULD GO SEARCHING FOR BURIED TREASURE. SIFTING THROUGH THE TRASH OF THE PLATEAU I FOUND SOME CHIPPED BOWLS AND A CHAPBOOK OF GREEK POETRY. RICHIE ONLY HAD EYES FOR LUMBER, ALL NIGHT WE CARRIED SLATS, FLATS.

AND WOODEN WINE CRATES BACK TO HIS APARTMENT OVER THE JAZZ CLUB

"WHAT DO YOU THINK OF MY FANCY NEW LOFT?" IN HIS BEDROOM STOOD A FIVE FOOT HIGH PLATFORM FOR HIS MATTRESS. IT WAS ASSEMBLED FROM AT LEAST HALF A DOZEN DIFFERENT SHADES OF LUMBER RIVETED TOGETHER, WOBBLING AWAY FROM THE CROOKED WALL.

"WHERE D'YOU GET IT?", ASKED AS I STACKED WINE CRATES IN A CORNER.

"I BUILT IT, DUH." HE HAD A HUNDRED WATT SMILE.

WE DROPPED THE LAST OF THE LUMBER AND HEADED NORTH TO THE ALL NIGHT BAGEL SHOP. RICHIE LED ME INTO A SMALL RAILYARD THROUGH A WELL WORN HOLE IN THE FENCE. WE TORE APART STEAMING FRESH SESAME BAGELS IN THE BELLY OF AN ABANDONNED BOXCAR. THE STARS HELD FORMATION, DISTORTED BY THE SEPTEMBER SMOG.

I STARTED TO TELL A STORY BUT RICHIE CUT ME OFF WITH THE WAVE OF HIS HAND. "LISTEN!" FAR OFF, OVER THE DIN OF THE HIGHWAY WE COULD MAKE OUT THE SOUND OF DRUMS, GUITARS AND TRUMPETS. RICHIE SAT TRANSFIXED WITH THE CITY'S SINGING VOICE. MUSIC SPRUNG AS IF FROM AN UNDERGROUND WELL FROM METRO STATIONS, OPEN MOUTHS, ALLEYWAYS, UNDERGROUNDS, FREIGHTYARDS, ETC.

A WALL OF HEAT HIT AS WE WALKED THROUGH THE DOOR. MY GLASSES FOGGED UP IMMEDIATELY. THE LAST WEEK OF INDIAN SUMMER HUMIDITY WAS CONDENSED INTO THIS ROOM. OUTSIDE WE SHIVERED IN THE RAIN, BUT THIS ROOM HAD A DELAYED REACTION TO THE CHANGE IN WEATHER. A BOX FAN WHIRRED IN THE CORNER, PUSHING THE HEAT IN ANOTHER DIRECTION.

"I GOTTA FIND SOMEONE," LEILA, RICHIE'S OLD ROOMMATE AND MY NEW FRIEND, GRABBED MY HAND. SHE DOUBLED ME ON HER BIKE ALL THE WAY UP THE HILL AND THROUGH A WARREN OF ALLEYS TO THIS PARTY. NOW SHE LED ME THROUGH THE THRONGS IN SEARCH OF HER DJ PAL. ON THE DANCE FLOOR A SECOND WAVE OF HEAT, STRONGER THAN THE FIRST. VIDEOS ARE PROJECTED ON

HANGING BEDSHEETS AND CRUSTY PUNKS CLAD IN BLACK AND PATCHES ARE DANCING LIKE THEY'RE ON SOUL TRAIN. I'M DANCING TOO, BUT WILTING IN THE HEAT.

REVELLERS LITTERED EVERY CORNER OF THE CONCRETE FLOOR. 'WHAT COULD THIS WAREHOUSE HAVE BEEN DESIGNED FOR,' I WONDER, 'OTHER THAN HOSTING THIS D.I.Y. ELECTRO PARTY?' THERE COULD HAVE BEEN NO OTHER FUNCTION THE ARCHITECT HAD IN MIND.

LEILA GRABS MY HAND AGAIN AND PULLED ME FROM THE PARTY A SCANT TEN MINUTES BEFORE LAW ENFORCEMENT ARRIVES. SHE SAYS 'BYE' TO THIRTY PEOPLE IN AS MANY SECONDS THEN THROWS ME ON THE BACK OF HER BIKE, PEDALING LIKE CRAZY, PULLING ME HOME. I FALL ASLEEP TWICE ON THE WAY, DREAMING OF I DON'T KNOW WHAT.

LEILA ALWAYS KNEW WHERE THE BEST PARTIES WERE, BUT WE ONLY WENT TO A COUPLE BEFORE SHE PACKED UP AND HIT THE ROAD. WITHOUT HER GUIDANCE I NEVER HAD A CHANCE TO FIGURE OUT MONTREAL NIGHT LIFE, SINCE MOST SHOWS WERE WELL KEPT SECRETS.

ONE NIGHT A CLUB I PAID THE COVER AT THE DOOR BEFORE REALISING I'D GOT THE DATE WRONG. TONIGHT WAS THE 01 SHOW, NOT THE IRONIC GOTH SHOW I WANTED TO SEE. I THOUGHT I MIGHT AS WELL CHECK IT OUT AND SOON I WAS SWEPT UP,

DANCING AROUND THE ROOM TO THE SOUNDS OF MEDIOCRE STREET PUNK. OVERGROWN BOYS WITH ARMS DRAPED AROUND EACH OTHER GANGED AROUND THE MICROPHONE, HOWLING TALES OF HOW MANY SKULLS THEY'D BEATEN. AMUSED AND CONFUSED, THE SKINS WATCHED ME DANCE AND SHOUT. I WASN'T WEARING BOOTS AND BRACES, OR EVEN SO MUCH AS A BOMBER JACKET.

ONE NIGHT I CAUGHT WORD THAT NICK'S BAND WAS IN TOWN. I BIKED ALL THE WAY OUT TO THE EAST END CAFE THE SHOW WAS AT. ONCE INSIDE I SAW OLD MEN PLAYING CHESS AND YOUNG HUSTLERS WITH THIN MOUSTACHES, BUT NO PUNKS. THEN I HEARD GUITARS CHUGGING THROUGH THE CRACKS IN THE WALL, AND NOTICED A DOOR AT THE BACK OF THE ROOM. I WALKED THROUGH IT AND THERE STOOD NICK ON STAGE, MID-RANT. "THIS NEXT SONG IS ABOUT HOW TIME... IS A CONCEPT USED... BY BOSSES TO KEEP US DOWN," HE COUGHED INTO THE MIC, SIX FOOT TWO AND SKINNY AS A BULRUSH. HE BANGED A GONG FOUR FEET ROUND AND THE BAND LAUNCHED INTO THE NEXT SONG. THE ROOM ERUPTED INTO THE SEA OF FLYING FISTS AND ELBOWS THAT PASSES FOR DANCING THESE DAYS.

THE MOVES WERE SMOOTHER AT THE DECEMBER SIXTH MEMORIAL SHOW, A TOTAL MELANGE OF BREAK DANCERS, FUNK BANDS, M.C.'S, AND '77 STYLE PUNK ROCK AT THE CAVERNOUS CLUB ON

STE. CATHARINE. THE HEADLINING ACT WAS BAD NEWS BROWN A HIP HOP EIGHTEEN YEAR OLD WHO PLAYED HARMONICA. OCCASIONALLY HE ROSE FROM HIS SEAT TO DELIVER RASPY RHYMES WHILE A FRIEND STUTTERED BEATS.

I EYED THE STACK OF DUSTY LP'S IN THE BACK OF THE CROWDED ROOM. "C'EST COMBIEN?" I ASKED AS I BEGAN TO FLIP THROUGH THEM.

"ONE DOLLAR EACH," THE GREY-HAIRED MAN AT THE CASH REPLIED. "BUT I DON'T HAVE TO SELL THEM TO YOU."

MONTREAL. THE RENT IS SO CHEAP THAT MIDDLE AGED MEN RENT STOREFRONTS TO SELL OFF THEIR LIFE AFTER THEIR WIFE FINALLY LEFT THEM. RATHER THAN SORT EVERYTHING OUT THEY PUT EVERYTHING ON THE FLOOR AND DECIDE WHAT TO KEEP ONLY WHEN A CUSTOMER WANTS TO BUY. THEY SELL OFF THE REMAINS OF THEIR OWN PERSONAL APOCALYPSE, AND TAKE A LIKING TO IT.

THIS 'TROUVAILLE' (A WORD PLAY ON FIND AND WORK) WAS ONE OF HALF A DOZEN JUNK SHOPS ON AVE. DE L'EGLISE, NEAR MY HOUSE. TRANSLATED, THE STREET NAME MEANS 'OF THE CHURCH', BUT ITS NAMESAKE LOOKED MORE LIKE A CATHEDRAL. IT'S HULKING FRAME ANCHORING THE EAST END OF THE STREET, ANOTHER RELIC OF THE PROVINCE'S CRUMBLING DEVOTION TO CATHOLICISM. IT'S BEEN OVER THIRTY

YEARS SINCE THE QUEBECOIS BEGAN ABANDONNING THEIR CHURCH LIKE A SINKING SHIP. A FEW NEIGHBOURHOOD WOMEN REGULARILY FILLED THE PEWS, BUT ONLY THOSE WITH WHITE HAIR REMEMBER THE RUSH THAT COMES WITH FEARING G.OD.

AVENUE DE L'EGLISE FARED LITTLE BETTER THAN IT'S EPONYM THOUGH IT REMAINED THE MAIN ARTERY OF VERDUN, A NEIGHBOURHOOD WITH A RICH HISTORY WHICH DECAYED APPROPRIATELY. ALL FALL I HAD TO DODGE SPEEDING CARS SINCE THE CROSSWALK SIGNS WERE BROKEN. AN OLD MAN POSTED HIS OPEN LETTER ON TELEPHONE POLES, LAMENTING DAYS GONE BY WHEN IT WAS BLUE COLLAR AND BOTH FRENCH AND ENGLISH TOOK PRIDE IN THE NEIGHBOURHOOD. HE DERIDED THE MAYOR'S "SURRENDER OF ONCE THRIVING VERDUN TO THE WOES OF CARELESS FISCAL PLANNING." AS IF TO ASSUAGE THE POOR CRANK FURTHER DOWN THE ROAD A DECADE OLD SIGN IN FRONT OF A BURNT OUT ROWHOUSE OPTIMISTICALLY PREDICTED "COMING SOON: CONDOMINIUMS!"

WALKING UP DE L'EGLISE THE FIRST TIME I FOUND A CLOSED UP MOVIE THEATRE, A CLOSED BOWLING ALLEY, AN 'AUTHENTIC BRITISH FISH 'N CHIPS SHOP' WHERE THE WAITRESS DIDN'T SPEAK ENGLISH, AND A POST OFFICE WHERE THE TWO MOUSTACHE WEARING MEN BICKERED LIKE AN OLD MARRIED COUPLE. ONE MAN'S MOUSTACHE WAS WHITE, THE OTHER'S BLACK.

I ALSO FOUND SIX BARBERSHOPS, WHERE HAIRCUTTERS IN WHITE SHIRTS SAT IN THEIR SPINNING CHAIRS READING LE JOURNAL, WAITING.

THE EMPTY BUILDINGS WERE COVERED IN GRAFFITI. UNLIKE THE AUTHOR OF THE OPEN LETTER THE LAST GENERATION HAD GROWN UP KNOWING THEIR NEIGHBOURHOOD AS AN EMPTY HUSK. I STUDIED THE FADED TAGS IN BLUE AND GREEN KRYLON

ONE DAY I NOTICED A STORE-FRONT WINDOW PAINTED WITH THE WORDS 'H. LETOURNEAU VELOS.' I WENT HOME AND GOT GRACE THEN WALKED INSIDE, BREATHING IN GREASE AND NOTICING THE LINE OF TEN SPEEDS ACROSS THE BACK WALL. THE ROOM SAT COMPLETELY SILENT, APART FROM THE SOFT RING OF A BELL AS THE DOOR CLOSED BEHIND ME.

"BONJOUR," SAID H. LETOURNEAU AS HE EMERGED FROM THE BACK ROOM. "QU'EST-CE QUE TU VEUX?" HE ASKED SOFTLY.

TWO GENERATIONS AGO HE WOULD HAVE BEEN A LUMBER-JACK OR A BLACKSMITH. THE SLEEVES OF HIS SHIRT WERE ROLLED UP, REVEALING ARMS AS THICK AS CHRISTMAS HAMS. SUSPENDERS HELD UP HIS THICK WOOL PANTS AND A PAIR OF BLACK SPECTACLES CURLED AROUND HIS EARS. ATOP HIS SIX FOOT FIVE FRAME SAT A WREATH OF WHITE HAIR. "J'AVAIS UN ACCIDENT," I

SAID, POINTING TO MY SCARRED CHIN. HE LOOKED AT THE BEAT UP TEN SPEED I DRAGGED THROUGH THE DOOR, SIZING IT UP. HANDLE BAR BENT ON THE RIGHT SIDE, A BREAK CABLE PULLED FROM IT'S SOCKET, THE FRONT WHEEL ABOUT TO FALL OFF, AND MOST NOTABLY, BROWN BLOODSTAINS THE LENGTH OF THE FRAME.

HE PICKED UP THE BICYCLE AND RIGHTED THE HANDLEBAR WITH SHEER BRUTE FORCE. PULLING OUT HIS TOOLBOX TO FIX THE OTHER AILMENTS, HE WORKED SWIFTLY AND EFFICIENTLY, AS IF PLAYING AN INSTRUMENT. GRACE LOOKED LIKE A TINY NATIONAL STEEL GUITAR SITTING ON HIS LAP AS HE WORKED.

"WHERE ARE YOU FROM?" HE ASKED IN A LIGHTLY ACCENTED VOICE.

"OTTAWA, I JUST MOVED HERE LAST WEEK."

"MON FRERE HABITE À ORLEANS. I LOVE TO GO SEE THE COLOURS OF LEAVES IN THE FALL AU PARC GATINEAU."

"I DO TOO, BUT THE LAST TIME I TRIED TO GO SEE THE LEAVES I DIDN'T GET THERE UNTIL MIDNIGHT," I SAID.

HE SMILED AND TOLD ME THE PRICE OF THE REPAIRS AS HE PUT AWAY THE TOOLS.

"VIGNT SIX?" I ASKED, FULLY READY TO PAY HIM TWENTY SIX DOLLARS.

"NO YOU MISUNDERSTAND. TWO DOLLARS AND SIXTY CENTS"

I PAID HIM WITH A HAND

FULL OF CHANGE. HE PUT THE MONEY IN HIS POCKET, NOT THE GREEN CASH REGISTER PERCHED ON THE COUNTER. I THANKED HIM AND HEADED FOR THE DOOR, BUT HE STOPPED ME TO READ WHAT WAS SCRAWLED ACROSS THE FRAME OF MY BIKE. IT WAS COVERED IN BLOOD, BUT THE SHARPIE'D WORDS WERE STILL LEGIBLE.

"THIS MACHINE KILLS FASCISTS" HE READ ALOUD. THEN HE POINTED TO THE SCAR ON MY CHIN, VISIBLE THROUGH A FEW DAYS OF STUBBLE. "IT LOOKS LIKE THE FASCISTS ALMOST KILLED YOU." HE LAUGHED.

THIS IS LIKE TOTAL CENSORSHIP. I CAN'T BELIEVE THIS LAW IS GOING TO GO THROUGH," I SAID AS I LEAFED THROUGH THE PAPER'S CITY SECTION.

EVE NODDED IN AGREEMENT, THEN SHE SAID "SHUT UP AND KISS ME."

DOWN AT CITY HALL THERE WAS A BY-LAW ON THE TABLE BANNING POSTERING ON TELEPHONE POLES AND STREETLAMPS. POSTERS WERE MY LIFEBLOOD, ON MY WEEKLY TRIP DOWNTOWN I STOPPED DOZENS OF TIMES TO DECIPHER THE NEW BATCH. I TOOK OFFENCE AT CITY HALL TRYING TO STOP ONE OF THE TRULY PUBLIC ART FORMS, AND STIFLING ONE OF THE FEW ATTEMPTS PUNKS MADE AT COMMUNICATING WITH THE OUTSIDE WORLD.

TEMPERS FLARED AS WORD OF THE PENDING BYLAW SPREAD.

SHAWN SET A DATE FOR THE RESISTANCE TO MEET AND DEVISE STRATEGY, FRIDAY AT MIDNIGHT. EVE AND I TOOK UP THE CHALLENGE A PROPAGANDA COUNTER-ATTACK. TOGETHER WE COPIED A HUNDRED COPIES OF OUR VAGUELY THREATENING POSTER, WHICH READ "WE WILL NOT BE SILENCED!" IN BIG, BOLD LETTERS. ON THE APPOINTED NIGHT I FOUND MY WAY TO SHAWN'S HOUSE BENEATH THE QUEENSWAY. AS I RANG THE BELL I WONDERED IF THERE WOULD BE A PASSWORD IN EFFECT.

SHAWN LET ME IN AND I TOOK A SEAT ON ONE OF THE LIVING-ROOM COUCHES. A QUICK GLANCE AROUND THE ROOM REVEALED A MOTLEY CREW, GATHERED FROM EVERY CORNER OF THE CITY. WE HAD EACH CUT AND PASTED HUNDREDS OF ANTI BY-LAW FLYERS, GETTING OUR MESSAGE ACROSS WITH VARYING DEGREES OF MENACE.

A DIRTY DOZEN OF FREEDOM FIGHTERS, AND WE WERE PREPARED TO DEFEND OUR CAUSE, TO THE DEATH IF NECESSARY. EVERYONE WORE BLACK FROM HEAD TO TOE, MYSELF INCLUDED. WE WERE CLANDESTINE AS FUCK, AND EYED EACH OTHER SUSPICIOUSLY. WOULD CODENAMES BE ASSIGNED?

"WELL, I GUESS EVERYONE'S HERE," SHAWN BROKE THE SILENCE AT QUARTER PAST.

"SO WHAT'S THE PLAN?" I ASKED. TONIGHT THERE WAS NO WALL WE WOULDN'T SCALE, NO LOCK WE WOULDN'T PICK, NO MEMBER OF CITY COUNCIL WE WOULDN'T

ASSASSINATE IN COLD BLOOD. SHAWN NEED ONLY SAY THE WORD AND SET US LOOSE.

"UH, SHIT, WHAT DO YOU GUYS WANNA DO? I JUST THOUGHT WE COULD PUT SOME POSTERS UP AROUND TOWN." THIS PLAN WASN'T NEARLY AS TREASONOUS AS WE HAD HOPED.

NEAR THE DOOR A KID IN A BLACK LEATHER JACKET WITH A TUFT OF FIRRY RED HAIR SPOKE UP. "I KNOW WHERE THE MAYOR LIVES. WHY DON'T WE GO POSTER HER STREET, MAN?"

HIS NAME WAS JB, A TACTICAL GENIUS IN OUR WAR OF WHEAT PASTE AND RIGHTEOUSNESS. OUR ARMY STAYED OUT ALL NIGHT, WALLPAPERING THE MAYOR'S SUBURBAN STREET WITH OUR BIG BOLD OPINIONS, STAINING OUR BLACK CLOTHES WITH PASTE.

OF COURSE THE BY-LAW PASSED UNANIMOUSLY, PERHAPS OUR PROTEST CONTRIBUTED TO IT'S SPEEDY RATIFICATION. THE LAW STATES THAT A POSTER CAN ONLY BE PUT UP TWENTY-ONE DAYS OR LESS BEFORE A SHOW AND PULLED DOWN TWENTY FOUR HOURS AFTER IT TAKES PLACE. MOST POSTERS FALL VICTIM TO THE WINTER WIND AND SPRING SLEET BEFORE CITY EMPLOYEES CAN GET TO THEM.

"I WISH I WAS STILL AS ANGRY AS I WAS WHEN I WAS FIFTEEN," SAYS JB. FOUR YEARS LATER IN MONTREAL, THE FIRST TO

BREAK THE SILENCE THAT HAD ALREADY FOLLOWED US OUT OF THE MOVIE THEATRE AND DOWN THE BLOCK. SEEING THE OLD DEAD KENNEDYS STENCIL AT THE CORNER OF MILTON AND HUTCHISON FORCED HIM TO SPEAK.

"JB, IF ANY OF US WERE AS ANGRY AS WE WERE WHEN WE WERE FIFTEEN, WE'D BE DEAD," SAID MP.

"OR IN JAIL," I ADDED.

ALL MONTH LONG THE MOVIE THEATRE WAS SHOWING PUNK MOVIES, EVERY FRIDAY AT MIDNIGHT. IT WAS IN A CRUMMY LITTLE THEATRE, IF THE FILM WAS DELAYED THEY WOULD PLAY A SCRATCHY MIXTAPE FROM 1985 OVER THE STEREO. THE USHERS STARED NERVOUSLY AT THE AUDIENCE, IN THE ROWS SOME DRESSED IN SPIKES AND CHAINS WHILE OTHERS WORE BROOKS BROTHERS. IN THE BOOTH THE PROJECTIONIST SHAKILY CUED UP THE ANCIENT PRINT.

THE MOVIES MADE US LAUGH AND GROAN. A CHERUBIC BILLY IDOL SANG 'KISS ME DEADLY' AS HIS BLEACH BLONDE LIBERTY HAWK FLOPPED TO AND FRO. NANCY TRIED TO FUCK SID ON CAMERA, BUT VICIOUS PASSED OUT IN THE MIDDLE OF DOING THE DEED. BUT THERE WERE ALSO MOMENTS WHEN TIME STOOD STILL, OR CRACKED WIDE OPEN. POLY STYRENE DANCED IN CIRCLES SCREAMING, "BIND ME, TIE ME, CHAIN ME TO THE WALL. I WANT TO BE A SLAVE_

TO YOU ALL!"

TONIGHTS FLICK HAD NONE OF THOSE BLINDING MOMENTS. IT WAS A DOCUMENTARY ABOUT A TRIBE OF HOLLYWOOD GUTTER PUNKS WHO SURVIVED BY WITS ALONE. THE FILM, AFTER TWO HOURS OF MISERY, END ON AN ALMOST HOPEFUL NOTE, UNTIL AN EPILOGUE REVEALED THAT TWO OF THE PUNKS LATER DIED WHEN THEIR SQUAT CAUGHT FIRE. AFTER THAT THE OTHER PUNKS ALL VANISHED FROM THE STREETS, GONE AND FORGOTTEN.

"WHEN I WAS FIFTEEN," JB CONTINUED, PUTTING HIS COLLAR UP AGAINST THE WIND "I WORKED AT A VIDEO STORE NEAR MY MOM'S HOUSE. ALL MY FRIENDS ABANDONNED ME WHEN THEY DISCOVERED BOOZE AND CIGARETTES. I WALKED AROUND WEARING A BIG TRENCHCOAT I STOLE FROM MY DAD, WONDERING, 'IS THIS ALL THERE IS TO LIFE: LONELINESS AND RECURRING NIGHTMARES OF A NUCLEAR HOLOCAUST?

"THEN I FOUND THE DEAD KENNEDYS, THEIR MUSIC WAS WRITTEN FOR ME ONLY, I SWEAR. I STILL DREAMPT OF THE END OF THE WORLD BUT IT SORTA BECAME A JOKE. INSTEAD OF BEING DEPRESSED I HATED EVERYTHING, BUT I COULD LAUGH AT IT TOO!"

I WAS IMPRESSED BY HIS NOSTALGIA. AND WHO DOESN'T LONG FOR THE DAYS WHEN THE WORLD WAS SO SIMPLE THAT EVERY TURN OF THE NEWSPAPER PAGE

REVEALED ANOTHER SYMPTOM OF THE WORLD'S SURELY TERMINAL DISEASE? JB AT FIFTEEN HAD A TRUE RAGE, AS APOCALYPTIC AS IT WAS ADOLESCENT.

"MAN, I HEARD THEY'RE MOVING THE INDONESIAN EMBASSY BECAUSE THEY'RE SO SICK OF THE PROTESTS. THEY CAN RUN BUT THEY CAN'T HIDE, THOSE FU-" HE CAUGHT HIMSELF "JERKS."

"JB, IF I HADN'T A BEEN AT WORK I WOULD'VE BEEN RIGHT BESIDE YOU, ADMITTED OFFICER BROWN. THE SOFT SPOKEN GAY COP WHO RENTED VIDEOS FROM JB'S STORE ALMOST EVERY NIGHT. THAT AFTERNOON JB HAD ATTENDED THE BIG MARCH FOR A FREE EAST TIMOR. FROM BEHIND THE VIDEO CHECK OUT COUNTER HE GAVE OFFICER BROWN, GREG, AN IMPASSIONED RECOUNTING OF THE DAYS EVENTS.

"REALLY?"

"OF COURSE, IT'S A CRIME THAT THOSE PEOPLE'S COUNTRY HAS BEEN STOLEN FROM 'EM. AND THE WORST PART IS THAT NO ONE'LL DO A THING ABOUT IT.

JB HANDED GREG HIS MOVIES AND AS HE LEFT JB THOUGHT OF WHAT HE HAD SAID, THEN HIS MIND FLASHED BACK TO THE BIG TIP GREG HAD GIVEN HIM AT CHRISTMAS. THEN HE THOUGHT 'I GUESS ALL PIGS AREN'T EVIL'

HE STILL HATED CARS,

UNTIL A FAMILY FRIEND LEANT
JBONE THE SUMMER HE NEAR-
LY HAD A NERVOUS BREAKDOWN.
AND HE FOUND LONG DRIVES
WERE ONE OF THE FEW THINGS
THAT COULD CALM HIM DOWN.
HE STILL CALLED WORKERS
IN ADVERTISING 'THE SCUM OF THE
EARTH' UNTIL HE MET MP'S
UNCLE, A VETERAN OF THE FABLED
EARLY VANCOUVER PUNK SCENE.
THEY GOT ALONG FAMOUSLY, EVEN
AFTER MP'S UNCLE ADMITTED HE
MADE ADS FOR A LIVING. THE
TARGET OF HIS VITRIOL GOT
SMALLER, LIKE A BULLSEYE
LOSING ANOTHER RING.

WE MET EVERY OTHERNIGHT
AT A CAFE NEAR THE CHILDREN'S
HOSPITAL. LOUD DANCE MUSIC
BLEW OUT OF THE STEREO, COMPET-
ING WITH MUSIC VIDEOS FLICKER-
ING ACROSS A BIG SCREEN T.V. FOR
OUR ATTENTION. I WATCHED JB
AND MP DOTE ON EACH OTHER, IT
WAS EMBARASSING, KISSING
EACH OTHERS CHEEKS AND HANDS
MP WENT HOME AT TWO
A.M. AND THEN JB AND ME
WALKED THE STREETS TELLING
STORIES. ONE NIGHT WE WALKED
THE SIDEWALK OF A FOUR LANE
STREET IN THE FINANCIAL DISTRICT.
VACANT SKYSCRAPERS STOOD ALL
AROUND US, ON SEVERAL LEVELS
WE SAW THE LIGHTS STILL LEFT
ON FOR THE CLEANING STAFF,
CLIMBING THE BUILDING ONE
FLOOR AT A TIME. THE STREET
WAS COMPLETELY EMPTY AND I
REALISED I'D NEVER SEEN IT IN

THE LIGHT OF DAY. I HAD NO IDEA WHAT THE PEOPLE WHO WORKED IN THESE BUILDINGS LOOKED LIKE.

"I LOVE THIS TOWN, BUT SOME NIGHTS I FEEL LIKE IT COULD SWALLOW ME WHOLE," I ADMITTED "I COULD JUST DISAPPEAR AND NO ONE WOULD MISS ME."

"THAT'S NOT TRUE. I'D MISS YOU A HELL OF A LOT," SAID JB WITHOUT SKIPPING A BEAT. MAYBE ALL THAT HATE IN HIS BLACK LEATHER CLAD HEART TURNED TO LOVE SOMEWHERE ALONG THE LINE BETWEEN HOME AND HERE, THEN AND NOW.

WHEN I THINK OF THE WORLD'S DISPOSSESED ONLY ONE SOUND COMES TO MIND: THE CRACKLE OF STATIC AND VOICES FADING IN AND OUT ON MY BROTHER'S SHORTWAVE RADIO. I WAS FOUR YEARS YOUNGER AND STILL DIDN'T UNDERSTAND HIS OBSESSION WITH CRACKPOT DIATRIBES, BUT ONE HOT SUMMER NIGHT, AT THE AGE OF TWELVE, I SAT AND LISTENED WITH HIM.

FUNDAMENTALISTS WITH RICH SOUTHERN DRAWLS WARNED OF GOD'S WRATH, THY KINGDOM COME WAS NIGH. CUBAN CAPITALISTS, SECOND GENERATION EXILES DERIDED CASTRO AND COMMUNISM IN A RAPID FIRE MIXTURE OF SPANISH AND ENGLISH. "THE RED BLOOD OF THE FILTHY COMMUNISTS WILL FLOOD THE

ISLAND THAT IS RIGHTFULLY OURS ..."

RADIO END OF WORLD WAS SEPARATED FROM RADIO HOPE BY A SLIVER OF THE DIAL ON SHORTWAVE ONE. STATIONS BLED INTO EACH OTHER UNTIL THE DIFFERENT RADIO ANNOUNCERS VOICES SOUNDED NEARLY AS ONE. THEIR BROADCAST TOWERS STOOD THOUSANDS OF MILES APART BUT THEY STILL CROWDED THE SAME FREQUENCY.

I HAVE A RECORD WHICH WAS RECORDED THAT FALL IN MONTREAL AND TAPES OF CREAKING SHORTWAVE VOICES FADE IN AND OUT OVER THE DRONING SONGS. LISTENING ON MY HEADPHONES I CAN ALMOST HEAR THOSE EPIC LEADEN CLOUDS PLODDING ACROSS THE MONTREAL SKY. I CAN ALMOST SEE THE SPOTLIGHT THAT SWUNG IN CIRCLES ACROSS THE SKYLINE EVERY NIGHT, GIVING THE IMPRESSION OF A CITY AT WAR. BUT A WAR AGAINST WHOM? THE PAST? ITSELF?

FIVE YEARS AGO THE LATEST EXODUS OF ANGLOPHONES BEGAN. MOST THOUGHT THE CITY DOOMED TO DEFLATE LIKE AN OLD HELIUM BALLOON. THIS CAME IN THE WAKE OF QUEBEC'S LATEST REFERENDUM ON SOVEREIGNTY. IN THE END THE PROVINCE'S TROUBLED MARRIAGE TO THE DOMINION WAS SAVED, BY A MARGIN OF LESS THAN ONE PERCENT OF THE VOTE. IT WAS A HOLLOW VICTORY.

THE NEW MILLENIUM WAS ON FINAL APPROACH AND THE SENSE OF APOCALYPSE CHIC GREW IN THE CITY. AMONG THE ANGLOS TOO BROKE,

STUBBORN, OR INDIFFERENT TO FLEE A CERTAIN ROMANCE WITH COLLAPSE TOOK HOLD. THE CITY WAS DECAYING AND SOME DAYS THE END OF THE WORLD DID SEEM JUST AROUND THE CORNER. THE SIGNS WERE EVERY WHERE. ONE DAY AT THE SALVATION ARMY MY PURCHASES PLUS TAX TOTALED $6.66, THE JAMAICAN CASHIER JUMPED, "OH MY, MY," SHE SAID, SCRAMBLING TO ADD A PENNY. WERE THESE THE END TIMES?

ALEX SAID IT BEST, "MONTREAL LOOKS LIKE THE FUTURE, AS IMAGINED IN 1973." BANKS WERE CONCRETE RENDITIONS OF SPACESHIPS, THE CRUMBLING STADE OLYMPIQUE WAS THEIR LAUNCHPAD. CONCRETE AUTOROUTES TOWERED OVER THE CITY, ONE COULD ONLY HOPE THE ARCHITECTS SAW THEM AS A DESPAIRING STOPGAP MEASURE, TO BE TORN DOWN AFTER THE ADVENT OF FLYING CARS.

BUT AFTER THREE HUNDRED AND FIFTY YEARS OF SMALLPOX, RELIGIOUS STRIFE, FASCIST GOVERNMENT, BOMBS IN THE MAILBOX STYLE TERRORISM, AND MILITARY OCCUPATION IT WOULD TAKE MORE THAN A STALLED ECONOMY AND AN ANGLO EXODUS TO DO OUR HERO IN NOW. ALONG THE LACHINE CANAL THE OUTLINE OF CRANES COULD BE SEEN. FOR THE FIRST TIME IN TWO DECADES THE SKYLINE WAS DOTTED BY SKELETONS OF NEW BUILDINGS.

THURSDAY NIGHTS I DID A THREE HOUR SHIFT VOLUNTEERING AT THE BIKE TOOL LIBRARY. THE NIGHT OF MY FIRST SHIFT I COULDN'T FIND THE PLACE, SO I FOUND MANNY INSTEAD.

"WHAT DO YOU MEAN YOU CAN'T FIND IT, IT'S SO OBVIOUS," HE SAID, LEADING ME TO THE END OF A DARK ALLEY, POINTING TO A DOORWAY BENEATH AN ICY STAIRCASE AND A BARE LIGHTBULB.

INSIDE GRANT ASKED ME "ARE YOU A MECHANIC?"

"UH... NO."

"ARE YOU MECHANICALLY MINDED? AT ALL?"

FOLLOWING A LONG SILENCE HE POINTED TO A STACK OF MOULDY MAGAZINES IN A DARK CORNER OF THE CONCRETE ROOM. "WE'RE PLANNING TO TURN THAT INTO A LIBRARY, SOMEONE JUST DONATED ALL THOSE BIKE MAGS. WANNA ORGANISE 'EM?"

THAT WAS ME, THE LIBRARIAN OF THE BIKE SHOP, A SQUARE PEG IN A ROUND HOLE. BUT EVERY THURSDAY NIGHT, THROUGH RAIN, SLEET, OR HAIL, I WAS THERE, BRINGING ORDER TO THE LAST TWENTY YEARS OF "CYCLE" AND "BICYCLING" MAGAZINES. I EVEN MANAGED TO SLIP IN A COPY OF MY OWN MAGAZINE, ONCE IT WAS PRINTED.

THE SHOP WAS RUN ON FUNDS PROVIDED BY THE UNIVERSITY, BUT MOST STUDENTS HAD NO IDEA IT EXISTED IF THE STUDENTS DID FIND IT, THE BIKES THEY WANTED FIXED LOOKED MORE LIKE THEY

needed to be put down. instead, it was overrun by bike messengers in bright rain jackets, cut off shorts and wrap around sun glasses

The messenger mechanics told stories of life on the road as they worked. this wasn't the same almighty road' constantly glorified by dilettante travellers. this road was the city, all of it's streets populated by hard working, alcoholics, eccentrics, gearheads, fuck ups, and intellectuals but mostly just ordinary folk. all manner of people found a bit of acceptance in the hydra-headed messenger underground, and they all talked about the road the way fisherman talk about the sea.

"shit, another winter. this is going to be my eleventh on the road, and my last. I swear to fuckin' god."

"do you guys remember l'il billy?" someone nodded. "well his bike got stolen so he'd been riding a loaner 'til payday. so payday comes and rather than heading straight to the bike shop he gets the bright idea that he needs a few drinks. he wakes up the next morning in alleyway, his bike's gone, so's the cash he had for the new one, and he has no idea what happened.

"and you wanna know

THE WORST PART? THE LOANER HE WAS RIDING WAS MY WINTER BIKE. I MEAN CHRIST, YOU CAN'T TRUST NO ONE." HE LAUGHED BITTERLY.

I MAY HAVE BEEN THERE EVERY THURSDAY, BUT I DIDN'T FIT IN, NOR DID I WANT TO. I NEVER DARED BRING GRACE IN TO WORK ON FOR FEAR OF BEING LAUGHED OUT OF THE ROOM. INSTEAD I KEPT THE LIBRARY IN ORDER, COLOUR CODED THE TOOLS, AND WATCHED FROM THE SIDELINES AS VOLUNTEER MECHANICS PERFORMED MIRACLES ON COLLAPSING BICYCLES.

AT ELEVEN O'CLOCK I COASTED DOWN THE MOUNTAIN AND THEN ALONG THE LACHINE CANAL. IT'S SURFACE WAS PLACID AND GREY, BENEATH IT SAT A FOOT AND A HALF OF THICK TOXIC SEDIMENT. A LAYERS OF CADAVERS AND CHEMICALS, LEFT OVER FROM WHEN ABATOIRS AND PAINT FACTORIES LINED THE SHORES. THE CANAL WAS SEALED OFF FROM THE RIVER, BUT IN THREE YEARS TIME IT WOULD OPEN AGAIN, THE SEDIMENT SEALED BENEATH A TARP, TO PLEASURE BOATS RATHER THAN BARGES.

THE ONCE DESERTED FACTORIES WERE NOW COVERED IN SCAFFOLDING. GRAFFITI ON A NEARBY WALL READ "GENTRIFICATION: COMING SOON TO A GHETTO NEAR YOU."

"ON A CLEAR DAY I SWEAR YOU CAN SEE ALL THE WAY TO NEW BRUNSWICK," HE SAID FROM THE KITCHEN AS I SHIVERED OUTSIDE, ON HIS THIRTY FIRST FLOOR BALCONY.

I STARED OUT PAST COBBLESTONED OLD MONTREAL, TO THE CONCRETE GRAIN SILOS IN THE DISTANCE, THE RED NEON 'FARINE FIVE ROSES' SIGN FLICKERING IN THE DISTANCE. I STEPPED INSIDE THE APARTMENT AND CLOSED THE SLIDING DOOR BEHIND ME, A STEAMING PLATE OF GLUTEN BUFFALO WINGS WAITING AT MY PLACE SETTING.

"BACK ON THE FARM IN INDIANA MY MOM TAUGHT ME HOW TO MAKE GLUTEN. WE'D PUT WHEAT TO SOAK IN BIG BARRELS ALL WINTER. MY POOR MOTHER, SUCH A TERRIBLE COOK," HE LAUGHED. EDMUND SYAM, RADIO HOST, ANTIQUE CAR ENTHUSIAST,

AMATEUR PAINTER, FOURTH GENERATION VEGETARIAN, COOKBOOK WRITER, AND NOW MY BOSS. THIS WAS OUR SECOND WEEKLY MEETING TO DISCUSS AND CONSTRUCT A PUBLISHING CALENDAR AND TASTE TEST THE NEW RECIPES. I WAS FINALLY GETTING PAID TO WORK IN THE DICEY WORLD OF INDEPENDENT PUBLISHING, TEN BUCKS AN HOUR UNDER THE TABLE.

IT WAS A GREY NOVEMBER MORNING, AND I SLEPT RIGHT THROUGH IT, MY ALARM GOING OFF AT NOON SHARP. "AW, SHIT" WAS MY FIRST THOUGHT OF THE DAY. I PROMISED MANNY I WOULD BE AT HIS WORKSHOP, AND I WAS ALREADY LATE. I GRABBED THE LAST DAY'S T-SHIRT AND JEANS AND RAN TO THE METRO STATION.

MANNY WORKED AT THE GREEN FRIDGE, A HEALTH FOOD STORE FUNDED BY THE UNIVERSITY IN THEIR MISSION TO FULFIL THE STUDENTS NEEDS. THEY MAINTAINED A WELL HIDDEN LOCATION, PROHIBITIVELY HIGH PRICES, AND STOCKED ONLY THE MOST OBSCURE ANCIENT GRAINS IN THEIR BULK BIN. TODAY, IN ONE OF MANNY'S ATTEMPTS AT REACHING OUT TO THE STUDENT BODY, THE STORE WAS HOSTING A VEGAN DESSERT COOKING LESSON FEATURING SOME LOCAL CELEBRITY. IT WAS STARTING AT NOON SHARP.

THE RAIN POURED AND TURNED THE STEEP STREETS INTO HUGE CONCRETE WATERSLIDES. I WAS SOAKED AS I WALKED INTO THE GREEN FRIDGE'S TEST KITCHEN LOCATED BEHIND A SHELF STACKED

WITH TWELVE DIFFERENT BRANDS OF MISO. I LOOKED AROUND THE ROOM, HOPING TO SEE SOME FAMILIAR FACES FROM THE CITY'S THRIVING FREE FOOD SCENE.

"HELLO! WHO ARE YOU?" A TWO HUNDRED AND FIFTY POUND BALD, MIDDLE AGED MAN. WITH A MIDWESTERN ACCENT ASKED ME. HE STOOD IN THE MIDDLE OF THE KITCHEN NEXT TO MANNY.

"UH... I'M JEFF."

"I'M EDMUND," THERE WERE ONLY THREE OTHER PEOPLE IN THE TINY KITCHEN AND HE INTRODUCED ME TO ALL OF THEM BEFORE CONTINUING GIVING DIRECTIONS ON HOW TO MAKE CHOCOLATE TOFU CHEESECAKE.

"NOW WE ADD SOME SOY MILK. THE SOY MILK SAYS... MOO!" HE MOOED AS HE POURED HALF A CARTON INTO A METAL MIXING BOWL.

AFTER THE DEMONSTRATION I MUNCHED ON ALL OF THE THREE DESSERTS HE PREPARED IN HOPES OF A LARGER AUDIENCE. EDMUND CLEARED HIS THROAT AND SPOKE UP. "IF ANYONE WOULD LIKE TO BUY COPIES OF MY TWO COOKBOOKS, JUST ASK. ALSO I'LL BE LOOKING FOR AN ASSISTANT IN THE NEAR FUTURE." I MADE A MENTAL NOTE OF HIS JOB OFFER, FOLLOWED BY A QUICK EXIT. THE CHEESECAKE HAD DWINDLED AND MANNY WAS ON THE PROWL. "HEY, ANYONE WANNA DO DISHES?"

"HERE ARE SOME PICTURES OF ME AT UNITY," HE HANDED ME AN ALBUM OF PICTURES WHICH INVARIABLY FEATURED A BUXOM

WOMAN WITH FLOWING LOCKS IN A BLACK PARTY DRESS. "MY DRAG NAME IS YOLANDE. I'M SO TRASH." I CHEWED ON THE LATEST CHOCOLATE CHIP COOKIE RECIPE FOR THE NEW ALL DESSERT COOK BOOK". I WROTE A PROPOSAL FOR A T.V. PRODUCTION COMPANY. I WANT TO DO A COOKING SHOW AS YOLANDE, THE TOFU TEMPTRESS. I HAD THE BEST NAME FOR IT TOO: DRAG IT TO DINNER! THEY NEVER GOT BACK TO ME.

ONLY A MONTH HAD PASSED SINCE OUR FIRST MEETING AND I ALREADY HAD BUSINESS CARDS, MY POSITION AS 'VICE PRESIDENT OF SALES' EMBLAZONED UNDER MY NAME. I CALLED STORES TO EXPAND DISTRIBUTION, WITH OCCASIONAL COMPROMISES. THE QUEER BOOK STORE ON THE MAIN WOULDN'T TAKE ANY COPIES UNTIL WE MADE STICKERS FOR THE COVER WHICH READ "GAY FOOD IS GOOD FOOD" ACROSS A PINK TRIANGLE.

THE NEXT MEETING WE ATE SWEET AND SOUR TOFU, A RECIPE FROM EDMUND'S FRIEND IN BRAZIL. "DID YOU SAY YOU WERE FROM OTTAWA?" EDMUND ASKED. I NODDED "THAT'S WHERE I HAD MY HONEYMOON." I BLINKED. "FRESH OUT OF TEACHER'S COLLEGE I TOOK A JOB OFFER TO BE PRINCIPAL AT AN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL IN NEWFOUNDLAND. THEY HAD NO TEACHERS BACK THEN, POOR NEWFIES. IT WAS A CATHOLIC SCHOOL, SO THE UNWRITTEN RULE WAS TO FILL THE POSITION I'D NEED A LOVELY

WIFE BY MY SIDE. OF COURSE I KNEW I WASN'T EXACTLY IN THE 'VAGINA BUSINESS' BUT I MARRIED A GIRL FROM SCHOOL ANYWAY. SHE WAS ABSOLUTELY CRAZY ABOUT ME. WHEN I POPPED THE QUESTION SHE NEARLY FAINTED. I THINK SHE KNEW ABOUT ME EVEN THEN. WE HAD A SMALL SERVICE.

"THERE WERE THESE CABINS YOU COULD RENT NEAR PARLIAMENT HILL. THE FIRST NIGHT I HAD TERRIBLE BUTTERFLIES IN MY STOMACH. SHE TOOK HER CLOTHES OFF AND IT WAS THE FIRST TIME I'D EVER SEEN A PUSSY. I THREW UP. CAN YOU BELIEVE IT? POOR DOREEN, I CRIED ALL NIGHT AND EVENTUALLY SPAT OUT THE TRUTH. SHE WAS THE FIRST PERSON I EVER CAME OUT TO MY WIFE.

"THE NEXT DAY WE MOVED TO NEWFOUNDLAND, WHERE I WAS THE SCHOOL PRINCIPAL FOR FIVE YEARS AND DOREEN HAD SOME WONDERFUL AFFAIRS WITH THE LOCAL MEN." HE PAUSED. "HOW OLD ARE YOU, JEFF?"

"TWENTY"

"ALL THAT HAPPENED WHEN I WAS NINETEEN. JUST NINETEEN." HE LOOKED OUT THE WINDOW

THE JANUARY THAW CAME QUICK, SUBMERGING THE STREETS IN SLUSH FIVE FEET DEEP. EDMUND AND I WERE ATTEMPTING TO FORD A PARTICULARILY DEEP PUDDLE AS WE TRIED TO MAKE OUR WAY TO THE UNIVERSITY ACROSS TOWN. THE

PRESTIGIOUS UNIVERSITY, NOT THE LIBERAL UNIVERSITY THAT FUNDED HEALTH FOOD STORES AND BICYCLE LIBRARIES. EDMUND HAD BEEN ASKED TO GIVE A TALK ON VEGANISM TO THE ENVIROMENTAL CLUB, AND IT SEEMED A GOOD OPPORTUNITY TO SCHLEP COOKBOOKS AS ANY.

I WORE A DIRTY SKIDOO JACKET AND EDMUND WAS COVERED BY A BLACK TRENCHCOAT AND A FEDORA AND WE SCALED TEN FOOT SNOWBANKS TOGETHER IN A HURRY. EDMUND POINTED TO A CATHEDRAL ON THE CORNER. "I LIVED THERE WHEN I WAS WORKING ON MY MASTER'S, MY FRIEND AARON LIVED THERE TOO. WE BOTH DID CUSTODIAL WORK FOR ROOM AND BOARD. THE HEAD CARETAKER LOVED THE IDEA OF A FAG AND A JEW LIVING IN A CHURCH TOGETHER."

BLACK CLOUDS BEGAN TO CIRCLE AND NIGHT FELL PREMATURELY, THE PUDDLES CRUSTING OVER WITH A THIN FILM OF ICE. SILENCE FELL WITH THE NIGHT, SO I TRIED TO MAKE CONVERSATION. "EDMUND, HOW DID YOU START WRITING COOKBOOKS? I GUESS YOU JUST WANTED TO GET THE WORD OUT ABOUT VEGANISM?"

"COOKBOOKS? WELL... THEY SAY THAT A FAG'S HOMETOWN IS WHEREVER THEY FIRST COME OUT. SO THIS IS MY HOMETOWN. WHEN I FIRST MOVED HERE I COULDN'T BELIEVE HOW MANY PEOPLE WERE JUST LIKE ME. HOW MANY MEN! THOSE FIRST YEARS HERE WERE

JUST LIKE HEAVEN. I LIVED IN THE VILLAGE AND NEVER LEFT. THE LIFE JUST CONSUMED ME. I BARELY COMPLETED MY DOCTORATE. I HAD A LOT OF GOOD FRIENDS.

"BUT THE EIGHTIES WERE DIFFERENT." HE CONTINUED, "ONE BY ONE I LOST THEM. MY HAIR TURNED GREY. THERE WAS NO ONE LEFT.

"FIVE YEARS AGO I WANTED TO DO SOMETHING. I WANTED TO REMEMBER THE WAY WE LIVED, WINE AND DANCING, AND I REMEMBERED ALL THE MEALS I COOKED. SO I WROTE UP THE RECIPES MY FRIENDS LOVED. TWENTY FOUR RECIPES FOR TWENTY FOUR FRIENDS GONE. I PRINTED ONLY ENOUGH COPIES TO GIVE TO THEIR PARTNERS OR THEIR MOTHERS, IF THEY WERE ON GOOD TERMS.

"I WANTED TO REMEMBER THE WAY WE LIVED."

WE ARRIVED AT THE CAMPUS AND AFTER A HALF HOUR OF FRANTICALLY SEARCHING, WE FOUND THE ROOM. I SET UP A MERCHANDISE TABLE, JUST LIKE ANY NIGHT ON TOUR WITH A BAND, LOOKING TO SELL PEOPLE A SOUVENIR.

HE LOOKED AROUND THE STILL EMPTY ROOM. "I WONDER IF THERE WILL BE ANY CUTE BOYS IN ATTENDANCE TONIGHT." HE GRINNED, "PRESENT COMPANY EXCLUDED, OF COURSE."

I BLUSHED.

TODAY COUNTLESS FETUS' ARE BEING MURDERED IN ABORTION CLINICS, SOME IN THIS VERY CITY."

I LOOKED TO MY BROTHER ROLLING MY EYES, TRYING TO KEEP DOWN MY CONTEMPT FOR THE MAN WHO IS ABOUT TO GIVE LAST RITES TO MY GRANDFATHER, LESTER J. RIOPELLE.

EVERY VISIT STARTED THE SAME, "PASS ME THE OBITS!" A GOOD DAY WOULD YIELD AS MANY AS THREE RECENTLY DEAD ACQUAINTANCES IN THE OBITUARY COLUMN. HE STROKED HIS CHIN AS HE READ. "IF I DON'T SEE MY NAME IN HERE I KNOW I'M STILL KICKING.

HOW COULD HE NOT SURRENDER TO MORBIDITY? HIS NURSING HOME WAS LOCATED DIRECTLY ACROSS THE STREET FROM A FUNERAL PARLOUR, ROMAN COLUMNS HELD UP THE ROOF

AND SIGNS ON THE STREET READ 'FUNERAL PARKING ONLY'. HIS NURSING HOME AND THE PARLOUR MIGHT AS WELL BE CONNECTED BY AN UNDERGROUND TUNNEL.

"YOU KNOW, I'VE BEEN WATCHING THE PARLOURS OVER THERE," FROM HIS ROOM THERE WAS A CLEAR VIEW. "SOMETIMES I COUNT UP TO TEN HEARSES A DAY. THAT'S A GOOD BUSINESS TO GET INTO, I'LL TELL YOU."

EVEN ON THE BEST DAYS IT LOOKED LIKE HE WAS FIGHTING SOMETHING OFF AS HE SLEPT. BURROWED IN MY MOTHER'S LA-Z-BOY, LEGS WRAPPED IN A PLAID SHAWL, HIS EYES CLOSED TIGHT. SMALL STRANDS OF DROOL ESCAPED THE CORNERS OF HIS MOUTH AND SMALL SNORTING NOISES ESCAPED HIS NOSE.

THE LEFT SIDE OF HIS BODY LAY LIMP FROM A STROKE. EVERY TIME HE HAD TO GO TO BATHROOM I WOULD HAVE TO PULL HIM UP FROM HIS SEAT AND WALK/DRAG HIM THROUGH THE KITCHEN TO THE BATHROOM I PULLED DOWN HIS JOGGING PANTS, SAT HIM ON A WHITE PLASTIC BOOSTER SEAT ON TOP OF THE TOILET. WHEN HE CALLED ME BACK IN I PULLED UP HIS PANTS, PROPPED HIM UP AGAINST THE COUNTER AND PUMPED SOME SOAP INTO HIS WAITING SCAB ENCRUSTED HANDS

"THEY CALL THIS SHIT HOCKEY? BUNCHA OVERPAID CRYBABIES."

I PROTESTED, "C'MON LESTER, THE SENS ARE WINNING." BUT HE JUST LIFTED HIS CREVASSED HAND TO GIVE A DISMISSIVE WAVE. WHEN HE WAS YOUNG MOST PROFESSIONAL HOCKEY PLAYERS WERE PAID LESS THAN HE WAS, WORKING IN A MINE. ALL PLAYERS NEEDED DAY JOBS TO SUPPORT THEMSELVES IN THE OFF SEASON

"THESE PLAYERS AINT NOTHIN' BUT BULLIES. BACK THEN THEY HAD SKILL." THE DAYS HE CAME VISIT THE SPORTS CHANNEL WAS ALWAYS ON. IT WAS THE ONLY THE ONLY THING HE EVER SHOWED INTEREST IN. NOW HE HAD MORE INTEREST IN THE BLACK SQUIRRELS CHASING EACH OTHER AROUND THE YARD. HOCKEY WAS FADING INTO THE BACKGROUND JUST LIKE EVERYTHING ELSE IN HIS LIFE. AT THE AGE OF NINETY TWO EVERYONE HE'D EVER KNOWN HAD DIED, EXCEPT ME

OUR LIVES COLLIDED AT AN AWKWARD TIME, ME AND MY GRANDFATHER. THE DAY I GOT MY HIGH SCHOOL DIPLOMA IN THE MAIL, SHOVED IT IN MY BACK POCKET AND BIKED OVER TO THE HOME TO SHOW HIM. IT WAS A CLEAR, EARLY SUMMER DAY AND HE WAS SURPRISED "I'VE NEVER SEEN ONE OF THOSE BEFORE, HE SAID. HE ONLY HAD AN EIGTH GRADE EDUCATION, AND BECAUSE OF IT HE SPENT TWENTY YEARS

WORKING IN A MINE.

I WENT DOWN IN ONE OF THOSE GOLDMINES ONCE, ON A TOUR. I WAS OUTFITTED IN COVER-ALLS AND A BLUE HARDHAT WITH YELLOW PLASTIC CUPS TO MUFFLE THE NOISE. NEXT THEY ATTACHED A FIVE HUNDRED WATT HEADLIGHT TO MY HARD HAT AND ITS BATTERY TO MY BELT.

WE PLUNGED INTO DARENESS IN A DOUBLE DECKER STEEL CAGE ELEVATOR, FEELING THE CHILL MOIS-TURE AND HEARING DRIPS ECHO YOU COULD STARE AT THAT DARK-NESS FOREVER AND YOUR EYES WOULD NEVER DILATE ENOUGH TO FIND ANY LIGHT

EXITING THE ELEVATOR OUR HEAD LIGHTS WENT ON ONE BY ONE. WHEN LESTER WORKED DOWN HERE THE LAMPS HAD HALF THE WATTAGE, SO HE WAS GUIDED BY A MENTAL MAP OF THE SHAFTS AND TUNNELS. HE COULD FEEL THE WEIGHT OF THE CANADIAN SHIELD ABOVE HIM, PUSHING IN ON EVERY SUPPORT BEAM, JUST LOOKING FOR A BIT OF GIVE TO CAVE IN. HE COULD FEEL THE PRESSURE OF WORKING THE MOST DANGEROUS JOB IN NORTH AMERICA.

OVER THE YEARS HE TOLD ME STORIES OF MEN WHO PERISHED. HE'D SEEN MEN AND HORSES LOSE THEIR FOOTING AND FALL INTO THE DARK, SCREAMING. A CLOSE FRIEND

DIED IN, IN A FLOODED TUNNEL WHEN A DREDGING MACHINE FAILED.

"WE WERE WALKIN' DOWN THE TUNNEL ONE TIME AND THE ROOKIE IN FRONT OF ME WAS CARRYING A BOX OF TNT, HOISTED OVER HIS SHOULDER. HE LOST HIS GRIP AND THE DAMN THING LANDED ON THE COLD STONE FLOOR RIGHT IN FRONT OF ME. A SIX FOOT DROP, IT SHOULD'VE GONE OFF, BLOWN ME STRAIGHT TO KINGDOM COME, BUT IT DIDN'T." HE PAUSED TO LOOK ME IN THE EYE. "I DAMN NEAR SHIT MY PANTS."

THE BROTHER OF THE CLOTH SENSED HE WASN'T WINNING ANY CONVERTS, SO WE GATHERED IN A SEMI-CIRCLE AROUND LESTER'S BED, IN THE DARK NURSING HOME.

"LESTER, CAN YOU HEAR ME?" HIS EYES POPPED OPEN, AS THE PREACHER SPOKE.

"WE KNOW YOUR SOUL IS STRONG BUT THE FLESH IS WEAK. WE'VE GATHERED HERE TO PRAY FOR YOUR RECOVERY, BUT ALSO FOR THE LORD TO ACCEPT YOU IN HIS KINGDOM WHEN THE TIME COMES."

LESTER'S EYES FOCUSED AND HE LOOKED EVERYONE IN THE EYE, HIS DAUGHTER, HIS SON IN LAW, HIS WIFE OF SEVENTY YEARS, HIS OLDEST GRANDSON. THEN HE LOOKED AT ME, SMILED AND RAISED A FIST IN DEFIANCE

SNOW SPRAYED IN MY FACE, TURNING MY CHEEKS RED, MY HEART POUNDING, AS I SLID HEADFIRST DOWN THE FROZEN HILLSIDE.

"YEAH, BLUE!" CLIFF YELLED FROM THE TOP OF THE HILL.

I NAVIGATED THE PLASTIC TOBOGGAN MY BROTHER ONCE DUBBED, WITH ALL THE SAVVY HE COULD MUSTER AT AGE TEN, "THE BLUE STREAK" TO A STOP WITHIN SPITTING DISTANCE OF THE FROZEN-OVER POND. STANDING UP I GRABBED BLUE AND TUCKED HER UNDER MY ARM, NOTICING HOW BRIGHT THE STARS SHONE IN THE COLD DECEMBER SKY.

THIS IS THE ARBORETUM, OTTAWA'S FOREST OF RARE TREE SPECIES, BUT TO KIDS IT'S BEST KNOWN FOR THE SLOPE THAT SKIRTS IT'S SOUTH SIDE. EVERY WEEKEND DAY SIX MONTHS OUT OF THE YEAR THE ARBORETUM

SLOPE IS COVERED WITH KIDS IN SNOWSUITS, THE PATHS OF THEIR KRAZY KARPETS, FLYING SAUCERS, AND GT SNOWRACERS OCCASIONALLY COLLIDING

"YOU DIDN'T BELIEVE ME, DID YOU? I TOLD YA SHE WAS FAST," I SAY PROUDLY AFTER MY LONG HIKE BACK UP THE HILLSIDE. DRAGGING MY SOGGY SELF TO A BENCH I SAT DOWN AND THE CITY SEEMED VERY FAR AWAY.

IT HAD BEEN ONE HELL OF A YEAR FOR CLIFF. AFTER BUMMING AROUND MONTREAL HE SPENT THE SUMMER WORKING ON AN ORGANIC FARM AND LIVING IN AN ATTIC. THEN HE CAME BACK TO OTTAWA AND WENT TO SCHOOL. HE WAS TIRED OF TRYING TO GET HIS HIGH SCHOOL DIPLOMA, SO HE WENT TO UNIVERSITY INSTEAD. NOW HALF A DOZEN WELL WISHERS HAD GATHERED, TO CELEBRATE HIS MAKING IT TO ANOTHER BIRTHDAY. I DIDN'T KNOW ANY OF HIS FRIENDS SO I KEPT HOPPING ON BLUE AND DROPPING OUT OF AWKWARD CONVERSATIONS.

THREE HOURS AFTER SUNSET THE MERCURY DROPPED FAST. EVEN HARDY NATIVES OF THE TRUE NORTH SUCH AS MYSELF BEGAN TO FEEL IT. THE FIRST STAGE OF THE PARTY WAS WINDING DOWN UNTIL I HEARD A FAMILIAR VOICE MUTTERING IN THE DISTANCE. "CHRIST ALMIGHTY THIS MUST BE THE COLDEST NIGHT OF THE YEAR."

EVEN IN THIRTY BELOW JB'S

STYLE WAS UNWAVERING, FROM THE BOTTOM OF HIS DOC'S TO THE TOP OF THE POMPADOUR HE METICULOUSLY POMADED INTO PLACE. HE WAS WRAPPED IN THE FAMILIAR CHECKERED CORDUROYS AND UBIQUITOUS BLACK LEATHER JACKET, HIS ONLY NOD TO THE ICY WEATHER WAS THE LONG, WOODEN TOBOGGAN HELD UNDER HIS RIGHT ARM. I JUMPED UP AND RAN OVER TO HUG HIS SHIVERING FRAME. HE GRIN HIS TEETH. "WELL I GUESS I'D BETTER DO THIS, SINCE I CAME ALL THE WAY." HE PUT DOWN THE TOBOGGAN, GRABBED THE REINS AND FLEW DOWN THE HILL, SCOWLING ALL THE WAY.

A HUNDRED FACES, A FEW FAMILIAR, APPEARED AND DISAPPEARED DOWN THE HALLS OF CLIFF'S HOUSE. YOU NEVER FEEL AS WARM AS WHEN SITTING BY A HEATING DUCT AFTER SPENDING THE BETTER PART OF EVENING WITH YOUR FACE BURIED IN SNOW. EVE TALKED RAPID FIRE TO ME ABOUT HER NEW LIFE AT SCHOOL IN THE BIG CITY, RICHIE PLAYED DJ IN THE CORNER, AND JAMES AND ERIC MADE OUT ON THE COUCH.

CLIFF'S BIRTHDAY FELL ON THE LAST DAY OF 1999 AND EVERYONE HAD DRESSED UP NICE FOR THE END OF THE WORLD. PARANOIA ABOUT PLANES FALLING FROM THE SKIES, COMPUTERS EVAPORATING, AND MARKETS IMPLODING WERE RAMPANT. NOW WE WERE INTO THE LAST MINUTES OF THE YEAR, A FEW PEOPLE TURNED ON A T.V. AND

COUNTING DOWN "5... 4... 3..."

RELIC TAPPED ME ON THE SHOULDER. HE LOOKED, AS ALWAYS, LIKE A MOVIESTAR, WITH HIGH CHEEKBONES AND RAVEN HAIR. HE HAD JUST ARRIVED AND DIDN'T KNOW A SOUL AT THE PARTY, SO HE MADE A BEE LINE FOR ME AND MY BOTTLE OF RUM. I HADN'T SEEN HIM SINCE CHRISTMAS EVE.

I DON'T KNOW HOW IT STARTED, OUR RAGGED TRADITION, BUT WE FOLLOW IT EVERY YEAR. WE START LATE, DRINKING BEER IN MY PARENTS' LIVING ROOM, ME AND RELIC, MY OLDEST FRIEND. WE WATCH THE SAME MOVIE AS LAST YEAR, ABOUT HEAVY METAL AND MURDER IN A HICK TOWN, UNTIL WE START TO GET ANTSY.

DRIVING DOWNTOWN OUR FACES ARE LIT BY THE DIGITAL CONTROL PANEL GLOWING RADIO STATION CALL NUMBERS. ALONG THE STONE CANAL PAST THE FOOTBALL STADIUM WHOSE TEAM WENT OUT OF BUSINESS HALF A DECADE BACK. WE ARRIVE AT THE DINER AND MUMBLE "COFFEE AND FRIES" TO A WAITER IN A DIRTY T-SHIRT.

CHRISTMAS EVE IS THE ONLY NIGHT OF THE YEAR QUIET DESCENDS ON THE DINER. THE LOUD STEREO IS OFF, TO EERIE EFFECT. THE BUZZ OF THE NEON SIGNS IS AUDIBLE, AS WELL AS THE BUBBLING OF THE DEEP FRYER IN THE KITCHEN. THE WIND HOWLS DOWN THE STREET, TESTING THE

STRENGTH OF THE WINDOW PANES

"THERE'S THIS KID OUTSIDE PDX WHO OWNS ALL THIS LAND. PUNKS GO OUT THERE AND CAMP FOR MONTHS AT A TIME. I MIGHT DO THAT FOR A WHILE AFTER I GET MY DEGREE, OR GO TO GRAD SCHOOL," RELIC COUGHS.

"MOST OF MY CONTACT WITH THE PEPPER SPRAY AT THE APEC PROTESTS WAS INDIRECT. I DIDN'T GET ANY IN MY EYES," OR "WE JUST GOT EVICTED FROM THIS OLD HOSPITAL WE WERE SQUATTING WITH TWO HUNDRED HOMELESS DUDES." OR "I SAW D.O.A. PLAY IN JEN AND ANDY'S BASEMENT," WAS HOW HIS INFREQUENT LETTERS BEGAN. AFTER HIGH SCHOOL HE HAD MOVED TO VANCOUVER. HE UNWITINGLY ARRIVED IN THE MIDDLE OF A WAR AGAINST ALL THINGS HALFWAY DECENT.

RELIC'S LETTERS OFFERED SKETCHES OF THE PEOPLE AND PUNK HOUSES OF THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST. SCENE REPORTS OF KIDS TRYING TO EKE OUT A BIT OF FREEDOM IN THE LAND THAT INVENTED THE THREE DOLLAR CUP OF COFFEE.

BUT AS VITAL AS THOSE LETTERS WERE THEY COULDN'T HOLD A CANDLE TO THE TALES HE DELIVERED IN PERSON CLIPPED MONOLOGUES OF THE STRUGGLE SPOKEN BETWEEN DRAGS OFF OF CIGARETTES AND SIPS OF BLACK COFFEE.

"I WAS IN BELLINGHAM, CHECKING IT OUT. THAT TOWN'S FULL OF RUINS FROM IT'S DAYS AS A MILL TOWN. BUT, SHIT MAN, IT SURPRISED ME HOW FAR THE YUPPIE THING HAS

GONE. EVERY EMPTY WAREHOUSE HAD A SIGN UP FOR NEW CONDOS OR OFFICES FOR INTERNET COMPANIES. I'M ALL FOR URBAN RENEWAL, BUT THAT SHIT IS JUST SO LAME. I MEAN, WHAT DOES IT LEAVE US?!!

THE NINETIES, THREE DOLLAR COFFEE, INTERNET EVERYTHING, "LOFT STYLE" CONDOS. THE NINETIES SPREAD LIKE AN INK BLOT INTO AN OCEAN, REMINISCENT OF WARTIME NEWS REELS CHARTING NAZI PROGRESS ACROSS NATIONS.

"YEAH, SHITTY," I OFFER.

THE POLICEMEN EATING POUTINE BY THE WINDOW STARE OUT AT THE EMPTY STREET. IMAGINE IT AS SOMETHING OUT OF POST-APOCALYPTIC FILM: LIGHTS BLINKING YELLOW, RED, GREEN TO EMPTY INTERSECTIONS. FOR HOURS AT A TIME TO ONLY TRAFFIC IS SNOW DANCING ACROSS THE ROAD, THE CARS SIT COLD, COVERED IN SNOW.

THE HANDS OF THE CLOCK ALIGN: MIDNIGHT. A TIRED, SOLEMN CHORUS OF "MERRY CHRISTMAS" WAFTS ACROSS THE ROOM. THE LIGHTS ARE STILL TOO BRIGHT, THE RED VINYL BOOTH STILL PAINFUL TO SIT IN AND RELIC ASKS ME AGAIN BROWS FURROWED WITH THOUGHT "WHAT'S A GUY GOTTA DO TO GET A REFILL AROUND HERE?"

THE GOLD BALL DROPPED OVER TIMES SQUARE AND THE UNTHINKABLE HAPPENED: ABSOLUTELY NOTHING. THE DOOMSAYERS WERE LEFT WITH NOTHING TO SAY AND SHITTY JOBS TO RETURN TO COME MONDAY.

"TOTAL PSYCH," SAID RELIC, ALREADY DRUNK.

COLD LEAKED IN THROUGH INVISIBLE CRACKS AND PAPER THIN WINDOW PANES. THE COLD LEAKED INTO OUR LIVES AND SHOWED US OUR MORTALITY. WALKING TO THE METRO WITH ME ADA SAYS "THE WIND IS BITING."

"ALSO SLAPPING, PUNCHING, AND KICKING BELOW THE BELT," I ADD, PULLING UP MY HOOD.

I SHOULD HAVE KNOWN IT WAS OVER WHEN HE STARTED TAKING FIDDLE LESSONS. THE TEACHER WAS FROM MANNY'S HOMETOWN, HE DROVE INTO MONTREAL EVERY WEDNESDAY TO JAM WITH OLD TIME QUEBECOIS FOLK MUSICIANS. BEFORE HIS WEEKLY SESSIONS JEAN-FRANCOIS STOPPED IN AT OUR HOUSE TO GIVE MANNY A LESSON IN FIDDLING, AT SEVEN A.M. MOST TUESDAY NIGHTS!

MANAGED TO CATCH TWO HOURS OF SLEEP BEFORE A FULL HOUR OF HIGH-PITCHED SCREECHING BEGAN.

THE LESSONS WERE JUST ONE PART OF MANNY'S NEW HEALTHY LIFESTYLE. EVERY MORNING HE WOKE AT FIVE A.M. AND WALKED TO ILE DES SOEURS JUST TO CATCH THE FIRST STIRRINGS OF DAWN.

"WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO DO TODAY?" HE WOULD ASK AFTER HIS BE-MULLETED TEACHER LEFT.

I LOOKED OUT AT THE DREADED DAYLIGHT. "... SLEEP" WAS MY ONLY REPLY. LORD KNOWS I'D ALREADY LOST ENOUGH OF IT.

MANNY SCOWLED, HE COULDN'T UNDERSTAND THE PRIVACY I FOUND LATE AT NIGHT LISTENING TO THE SOOTHING RUMBLE OF THE AUTOROUTE OVERHEAD.

EARLY TO BED, EARLY TO RISE WASN'T THE ONLY NEW POLICY MANNY HAD TAKEN THE HIGH ROAD IN ALL THINGS. I HAD A GIRLFRIEND, WHILE HE WOULD ONLY ENGAGE IN NON-MONOGAMOUS RELATIONSHIPS. I ATE FOOD FROM THE GROCERY STORE, WHILE HE ATE ONLY LOCAL GROWN ORGANIC, OR SOUP MADE WITH TWENTY DOLLAR BLOCKS OF MISO. I LISTENED TO PUNK ROCK, WHILE HE WOULD ONLY LISTEN TO CANONIZED FOLK MUSIC.

"UH, CAN YOU TURN THIS DOWN?" HE HELD A NEWLY PURCHASED ARCHIVAL RECORDING. "CAN WE LISTEN TO MY NEW CD INSTEAD?"

"COME ON MANNY, IF ANY

MUSIC IS SELF-TAUGHT, FREE OF CORPORATE INTERFERENCE, AND WRITTEN BOTH BY AND FOR THE 'FOLK', THAN THIS, IS IT, THIS IS THE PURE MUSIC." I SAID, AS I INCHED DOWN THE VOLUME OF MY STEREO.

HE RETREATED TO HIS ROOM, AND I COULD HEAR QUEBECOIS SQUARE DANCE TUNES IN THE BREAKS BETWEEN THE MINUTE LONG BLASTS OF FIERE CHICAGOAN LATINO PUNK ROCK I WAS LISTENING TO. "FUCK HIM," I SAID, AS I SANG ALONG UNDER MY BREATH.

"IL C'EST PAS EVIDENT." THE FIDDLE TEACHER SAID, WHENEVER MANNY HIT A BUM NOTE. I TRIED TO SLEEP THROUGH FOUR FIDDLE LESSONS BEFORE I AWOKE ONE AFTERNOON TO FIND AN ENVELOPE AT THE FOOT OF MY BED WITH MY NAME ON IT. I TORE IT OPEN, FINDING A NOTE INSIDE.

"JEFF, I WANTED TO TALK TO YOU FOR A WHILE NOW, BUT WE HAVE SUCH CONFLICTING SCHEDULES" WAS HOW IT BEGAN.

IT HAD BEEN A LONG COLD JANUARY. THE WALLS WERE THIN AND THE WIND BLEW STRAIGHT OFF THE FROZEN CANAL. OUR HEAT WAS ELECTRIC, SO OUR APARTMENT WAS RARELY WARMER THAN FIFTEEN DEGREES. FUSES KEPT POPPING AND THE MERCURY WOULD SINK TO TEN BELOW BEFORE I REALISED THE RADIATORS HAD GONE COLD. I WOULD WARM UP ON THE WALK TO THE HARD-

WARE STORE DOWN DE L'EGLISE.
WHEN THE COLD BECAME UNBEARABLE I WOULD WALK ALL THE WAY DOWNTOWN AND CATCH A TWO DOLLAR MOVIE. THE SNOW DRIFTS HAD PILED UP SO THAT IT WAS FAR TOO ICY TO BIKE DOWNTOWN.

THERE WAS A WAR BEING WAGED THAT WINTER, UP AND DOWN STE. CATHERINE, PITCHED CAMPAIGNS WERE WAGED FROM CINEMA TO CINEMA. THE LAST BASTIONS OF CHEAP FLICKS, MOVIE HOUSES THAT HAD STOOD FOR DECADES WERE NOW FALLING AT AN ALARMING RATE.

THE CULPRIT WAS THE NEW MULTIPLEX, THE PARAMOUNT, AT THE CORNER OF METCALFE STREET. AFTER ONLY A YEAR OF OPERATION IT WAS WELL ON IT'S WAY TO BECOMING THE BUSIEST THEATRE IN NORTH AMERICA. HOUSED BEHIND THE FACADE OF AN OLD OFFICE BUILDING SAT TEN SCREENS, EQUIPPED WITH DIGITAL EVERYTHING, AND SEATS THAT RIVALLED THE POSH PATENT LEATHER CHAIRS AT THE WESTMOUNT PUBLIC LIBRARY FOR COMFORT.

CRUSTY PUNKS FROM ALL ACROSS THE CITY EMERGED FROM THE GUTTER TO TAKE UP THE CHALLENGE OF FINDING HOLES IN THE ARMOUR OF THIS NEW SLEEK KILLING MACHINE. SO FAR ONLY A CONVOLUTED SCAM REGARDING FREE POPCORN REFILLS HAD MADE IT'S WAY DOWN THE GRAPE-

VINE. I IMAGINED OUR RANKS HAD BEEN INFILTRATED AND OUR DIVERSITY OF RIP-OFF TACTICS HAD BEEN DISCOVERED BY CORPORATE AMERICA. AT THE TAIL END OF THE NINETIES WE WERE IN THE MIDST OF A CRACKDOWN ON SCAMS, SIMILAR TO THE COINTELPRO CRACKDOWN ON THE RADICAL LEFT WHICH BROUGHT THE SIXTIES TO A CLOSE.

THE FIRST VICTIM WAS THE LOEWS CINEMA, THE BEST PLACE TO CATCH SUNDAY MATINEES OF ARTY HOLLYWOOD TRASH. THE LOEWS WAS A GREAT PLACE TO TAKE YOUR GIRL ON A DATE, AN EMPTY THEATRE WAS GUARANTEED, ALLOWING DUBIOUS ACTS OF LOVE TO GO UNNOTICED. IT TANKED DURING THE DRYSPELL BETWEEN CHRISTMAS AND EARLY SPRING OSCAR-MANIA

NEXT TO COLLAPSE WAS THE CINEMA CENTRE-VILLE, A VINTAGE DIVE LEFT OVER FROM THE SEVENTIES. THE SCREEN WAS AS BIG AS A HIGH SCHOOL CLASSROOM'S CHALK BOARD, AND IT HUNG BEFORE THIRTY BROKEN DOWN SEATS. ACOUSTIC PANELS THE COLOUR OF NICOTINE STAINS HUNG FROM THE WALLS.

A TWO DOLLAR MATINEE FOUND ME AND CLEOPATRA WATCHING THE SAD TALE OF AN OLD MAN DRIVING TO HIS LONG LOST BROTHER'S HOUSE. NEARLY ALL OF THE THEATRE'S SEATS WERE FILLED WITH THE TYPICAL WEEKDAY MATINEE AUDIENCE, THE IDLE RICH AND THE UNEMPLOYED. USUALLY THE TWO

GROUPS MIX LIKE OIL AND WATER, BUT HELL EVERYONE LOVES MOVIES.

THE CENTRE-VILLE WAS DIFFICULT TO LOCATE, AND THEREIN LAY MOST OF ITS CHARM. IT WAS LOCATED INSIDE A SUBWAY STATION, COMPLETELY SEPARATE FROM THE SNOWY STREETS ABOVE. IT WAS A CINEMA SPEAKEASY. UNFORTUNATELY ITS WELL HIDDEN LOCATION AND SUBTERRANEAN NATURE DID LITTLE TO PROTECT IT FROM THE BLOODBATH TOPSIDE.

THE LAST BASTION OF CHEAP MOVIES DOWNTOWN WAS THE PALACE HOLDING THREE MASSIVE SCREENS IN IT'S BELLY. BOTH MANAGEMENT AND PATRONS DID EVERYTHING POSSIBLE TO CONTRADICT IT'S REGAL NAME. I HEARD TALES OF SEX IN THE BATHROOMS, SEX IN THE AISLES, SPITTING ON THE FLOOR CRAZIES CURSING AT THE SCREEN, COUPLES BREAKING UP AND CURSING AT EACH OTHER, FIST FIGHTS, KNIFE FIGHTS, GANG WARFARE BREAKING OUT IN THE MIDDLE OF MOVIES.

NONE OF THE STORIES I HEARD WERE FIRST HAND, BUT SOMETHING ABOUT THE PLACE MADE YOU BELIEVE EVERY URBAN LEGEND. MAYBE IT WAS THE HIPHOP BLASTING FROM THE CONCESSION STAND, OR THE DOZENS OF PEOPLE IN TEAR AWAY TRACK SUITS AND SKULL CAPS STANDING BY THE BATHROOM DOORS. WHATEVER IT WAS, SOMETHING WAS DEFINITELY HAPPENING.

AT THE PALACE ALL YOU NEEDED WAS TWO MEASLY BUCKS TO WATCH NINETY MINUTES OF SECOND RUN HOLLYWOOD BULLSHIT. YOU'D HATE IT IF YOU HAD PAID A CENT MORE, BUT YOU REMIND YOURSELF 'YOU GET WHAT YOU PAY FOR' AND THAT SOMEHOW MAKES IT OKAY. MOST PEOPLE GOT IN LINE BEFORE THEY READ THE MARQUIS

I WENT ON PALACE DEATH WATCH AS SOON AS MANAGEMENT DARED CHANGE THE CLASSIC TWO DOLLAR TICKET JACKING IT UP TO A WHOPPING THREE BUCKS THEN A FEW DAYS AFTER I WARMED MYSELF UP BY WATCHING A MOVIE ABOUT THE DESERT, THE LAST FILM CAN WAS FILLED AND THE PALACE TURNED OFF ITS MARQUIS FORGOOD.

IT WAS WINTER AND I WAS BROKE, WORKING FOR EDMUND A FEW HOURS A WEEK BUT WITH NO OTHER PROSPECTS, AND LIVING IN THE COLDEST METROPOLIS IN NORTH AMERICA I WAS LIVING OUT AN AESOP FABLE, THE ONE ABOUT THE LAZY GRASSHOPPER WHO DIED AFTER SPENDING ALL FALL AT THE MOVIES. I CAREFULLY READ THE EVICTION NOTE MANNY HAD WRITTEN TO ME.

THAT NIGHT I WALKED THROUGH CARRE ST. LOUIS, REMEMBERING HOW HOT IT HAD BEEN JUNE WHEN I FIRST VISITED MANNY AND CLIFF. I HAD STRETCHED OUT UNDER A TREE,

JUST LIKE EVERYONE ELSE IN THE CITY, EYES WEIGHED DOWN BY HUMIDITY. TONIGHT THE PARK WAS DRESSED IN A THICK COAT OF WHITE, LAYING ABANDONNED FOR THE SEASON. AN IMAGE CUT IN SHARP LINES OF WHITE AND GREY.

AT THE DONUT SHOP I WAIT FOR THE BEST TIME TO GIVE HIM THE BAD NEWS. I'M HEADING BACK TO MY HOMETOWN. "MONTREAL'S BEEN HERE FOR THREE HUNDRED AND FIFTY YEARS," I EVENTUALLY SAY, "I'LL JUST HAVE TO TAKE MY CHANCES THAT IT'LL BE HERE A FEW MORE."

IN THE MEANTIME WE TELL STORIES OF OUR CHILDHOOD FLIRTATIONS WITH DEATH. AS A BABY LIVING IN NORTH AFRICA MP ONCE SHARED HER CRIB WITH A DEADLY SCORPION. JB ONCE WEDGED HIS ARM INTO A PIECE OF METAL ATOP HIS FATHER'S PARKED CAR, HE JUMPED OFF AND WAS LEFT WITH A HUNDRED AND FIFTEEN STITCHES IN HIS RIGHT ARM, WHICH WAS TORN RIGHT OPEN. AS A BABY MY BROTHER ONCE NEARLY SUFFOCATED ME BY PUTTING A PILLOW OVER MY HEAD.

WE LAUGH, SLOWLY REALISING THAT IF WE SURVIVED THIS LONG MAYBE JANUARY WOULDN'T COUNT US AMONG IT'S VICTIMS. NOT THIS YEAR.

LESLEY SAT ON A CONCRTE BLOCK WITH HER LEGS CROSSED, BROWN DREAD LOCKS HANGING OVER HER EYES. SHE TALKED HURRIEDLY AS HER DISPATCHER'S VOICE BUZZED OUT OF THE RADIO DUCT TAPED TO HER MESSENGER BAG.

SHE SUCKED IN ON HER SMOKE. "IT'S GOOD TO SEE YOU BACK IN TOWN. HEY, I'M SEEING A NEW BOY, I THINK YOU MIGHT EVEN LIKE THIS GUY."

"IS HE HUMAN?" I ASK SKEPTICALLY, REMEMBERING THE ROGUES GALLERY OF BOYS SHE'S DATED. BOYS WITH NO TEETH, BOYS WHO LIVE UNDER BRIDGES, BOYS WITH PROBLEMS TO SAY THE LEAST. A LONG PARADE OF THE CITY'S UNDERBELLY HAD PASSED THROUGH HER BEDROOM.

"HE READS. I MADE SURE TO LEND HIM SOME BOOKS AND TALK ABOUT THEM WITH HIM BEFORE I'D SLEEP WITH HIM. I JUST LEANT HIM

'HOW TO MAKE LOVE TO A NEGRO'. HE CAME BACK AND TOLD ME 'THAT'S A FUCKIN' GREAT BOOK.'

SHE PAUSES TO TAKE A CALL FROM THE HUB, A HOT SHOT DOWN ON ELGIN STREET. UNLOCKING HER BIKE SHE TELLS ME "YOU SHOULD COME OVER FOR COFFEE AND APPLE LATKES ON SATURDAY MORNING, MY BOY MIGHT SHOW UP." ON HER BIKE, SPEEDING OFF, SHE YELLS BACK TO ME "HE'S SO HOT. HE'S GOT HAIR DOWN TO HIS ASS."

THE MONEY RAN OUT AND I WAS BITTER. STUCK BACK IN MY HOMETOWN LIVING IN A TINY BACHELOR FILLED WITH DIRTY DISHES AND DUSTY NOVELS. OTTAWA WAS KILLING ME IN THE SAME OLD WAY, WHILE MONTREAL HAD BEEN KILLING ME IN NEW, EXCITING WAYS. STARTING WITH FROST BITE.

ONE DAY I PUT ON MY PARKA AND WALKED THROUGH CENTERTOWN IN THE COLD. MY HEAD WAS A MESS. HOW COULD I STAY IN THIS BROKEN DREAM TOWN? I HAD TOO MUCH HISTORY HERE, OF PAIN, REGRET, AND UNFULFILLED AMBITION.

I TURNED RIGHT ONTO CATHERINE STREET AND THERE IT WAS, THE BUS STATION. WHERE I WOULD SPEND MY LAST TWENTY BUCKS ON A TICKET TO MONTREAL WHERE I WOULD RELY SOLELY ON THE KINDNESS OF FRIENDS AND THE FREE VEGAN LUNCHES AT THE

UNIVERSITY FOR MY SURVIVAL

IT WAS A GREAT PLAN, BUT COMPLETELY DESTINED TO FAIL, SO I WALKED RIGHT PAST THE BUS STATION. MY DESTINATION WAS A SQUAT THREE STORY BUILDING SITTING UNDER THE QUEENSWAY THREE BLOCKS UP. A SIGN OUTSIDE READ 'OTTAWA ART BANK', BUT ONCE INSIDE A PLAQUE ABOVE THE ELEVATOR READ 'SOCIAL SERVICES: THIRD FLOOR.' ME, AND A FEW OTHER HARD LUCK CASES GOT IN THE ELEVATOR, GULPED HARD, AND PRESSED THE BUTTON FOR THE THIRD FLOOR. WE COLLECTIVELY SWALLOWED OUR PRIDE AND TOOK THE SHORT RIDE UP TO THE WELFARE OFFICE.

"MY GENERATION COMPLETELY RIPPED YOU OFF. WE WENT TO SCHOOL FOR FREE, SMOKED POT, AND HAD UNPROTECTED SEX. WE SNATCHED UP ALL THE GOOD JOBS AND HELD ONTO 'EM FOR DEAR LIFE AND NOW WE EXPECT YOU KIDS TO PAY FOR OUR RETIREMENT."

SITTING ACROSS THE DESK FROM ME WAS A THICK RED-HEADED MAN WHO LOOKED LIKE A FORMER PRO FOOTBALL PLAYER. I'D BEEN DREADING THIS CONVERSATION ALL WEEK LONG, EVER SINCE I CALLED SOCIAL SERVICES AND TOLD THEM I HAD TWO DOLLARS IN MY POCKET AND ANOTHER FIVE IN THE BANK. BUT HERE I WAS AND BILL MY CASE WORKER WAS BOTH BEGGING ME

TO TAKE THE MONTHLY CHEQUE ("JUST UNTIL YOU GET BACK ON YOUR FEET OF COURSE,") AND APOLOGIZING TO ME FOR PUTTING ME IN SUCH A TIGHT SPOT. TEN MINUTES AFTER ENTERING THE BUILDING I WAS A WELFARE RECIPIENT OF OTTAWA-CARLETON SOCIAL SERVICES.

ON THE WAY HOME I RAN INTO JERRY ON BANK STREET. HE WAS WEAVING DOWN THE ROAD ON HIS ORANGE SREED BIKE, THROWN OFF BALANCE BY A SUITCASE FILLED WITH CYMBALS HANGING FROM THE RIGHT HANDLEBAR.

HE WAS FRESH BACK FROM TOUR AND THE ROAD LEFT ITS MARK ALL ACROSS HIS STUBBLY MUG. THIS TRIP COULDN'T HAVE COME AT A BETTER TIME FOR HIM, IT BEGAN THE MORNING AFTER HE BROKE UP WITH HIS GIRLFRIEND FOR GOOD. TWO WEEKS SOUTH OF THE BORDER WAS JUST WHAT THE DOCTOR ORDERED TO CAUTERIZE HIS BROKEN HEART.

"I LOVE IT, LIFE IS SO SLOW DRIVE ALL DAY, PLAY AT NIGHT ..." WORDS FAILED HIM.

LAST SUMMER I WAS IN THE VAN TOO. WE SMOKED A LOT, AND BEFORE IT RAINED THE MOISTURE PULLED UP THE THICK SMELL OF TOBACCO AND COAL FROM EVERY CORNER. IT BECAME A TOUR DIARY. WE COULD CALCULATE THE

DISTANCES BETWEEN CITIES BY COUNTING CIGARETTE BUTTS. FROM NIGHT CLUBS TO BASEMENT SHOWS, WE KILLED OURSELVES TO KILL TIME.

DRIVING WEST DOWN THE 401 JERRY TOOK A LONG DRAG, THEN TURNED TOWARDS ME AND SAID "IMAGINE IF WE COULD SEE ALL THE PEOPLE WHO DIED ON THIS ROAD JUST LINED UP ALONG THE HIGHWAY."

FOR A BREIF MOMENT THE SUN CAME OUT AND WE WALKED TOGETHER DOWN THE ROAD OF SAGGING PORCHES. IT WAS AN AWKWARD SHUFFLE, BOTH OF US TRYING TO RELEARN THE CITY'S PACE. THE SNOW MELTED TO REVEAL THE DOG SHIT, TRASH, AND WARPED BIKE CARCASSES WINTER LEFT BEHIND.

AT 6:20 A.M. ON ANY GIVEN WEEKYDAY OTTAWA'S STREETS ARE QUIET AND NEARLY EMPTY. THE ONLY PEOPLE SCURRYING TO AND FRO WEAR BURGUNDY PANTS AND BAGS UNDER THEIR EYES.

TODAY I WAS WEARING THOSE BURGUNDY PANTS, PART OF THE MASS ISSUED UNIFORM OF THE BIGGEST DONUT STORE CHAIN IN CANADA, MY EMPLOYER FOR THE PAST MONTH. I WALKED INSIDE THE STORE, ONLY TEN TO SEVEN AND THE LINE WAS ALREADY SPILLING OUT ONTO THE STREET.

I STARED AT THE CUSTOMERS WITH CONTEMPT, HEADING TO THE BACK ROOM FOR A FRESH HAIR NET, THE BEGINNING OF A SHITTY DAY LIKE ANY OTHER.

OR SO I THOUGHT. "HEY," SUNDAR WAVED TO ME NONCHALANTLY FROM

BEHIND THE CASH, A FRESH NEW BURGUNDY UNIFORM HANGING OFF HIS WILLOWY FRAME, "I TOOK YOUR ADVICE"

I REMEMBERED SEEING HIM AT SOME PARTY THE WEEK BEFORE, BUT FORGOT THE OBVIOUSLY BRILLIANT ADVICE I'D IMPARTED TO HIM. "WHAT DID I TELL YOU?"

"THAT THIS JOB SUCKS, BUT YOU MAKE TWICE AS MUCH AS WELFARE," HE AWKWARDLY PLAYED WITH NAME TAG. IT READ "HI, MY NAME IS WARREN, I'M IN TRAINING" THE ONLY TRAINING NAMETAG IN THE STORE.

"WARREN, I'D LIKE A LARGE DOUBLE DOUBLE," BARKED AN IMPATIENT WOMAN IN LINE.

I RETIRED TO THE BACK ROOM, CLIPPED ON MY TIE, STOLE A FRESH SOUR CREAM DONUT FROM THE RACK, AND PONDERED THE LATEST ADDITION TO OUR 'TEAM' OF 'SERVICE REPRESENTATIVES.'

SUNDAR AND I WERE IN AN ART PUNK BAND TOGETHER IN HIGH SCHOOL, AND EVEN THEN HE WAS STICKING RULERS AND BUTTER KNIVES THROUGH THE STRINGS OF HIS GUITARS. THESE DAYS HE WAS FOLLOWING HIS DREAM OF BECOMING AN AVANT GARDE MUSICIAN, OCCASIONALLY FLYING INTO NEW YORK CITY TO PLAY IN AN ORCHESTRA COMPRISED OF A HUNDRED GUITARISTS.

HERE AT HOME HE PLAYED MANY A SHOW WHERE HE WOULD SIMPLY SLIP A CASETTE OF HIM

PLAYING IN A GHETTO BLASTER, PRESS PLAY AND THEN SIT, DOING NOTHING WHILE EVERYONE LOOKED AT EACH OTHER ANXIOUSLY. HERE I WAS, WORKING WITH A GENIUS, EACH AT OUR OWN CASH ASKING "SMALL, MEDIUM, LARGE, OR EXTRA LARGE?" FIVE HUNDRED TIMES A DAY.

WHEN I GOT CALLED IN FOR MY INTERVIEW AT THE DONUT SHOP I WAS FILLED WITH THOUGHTS OF SMALL TOWN DONUT JOINTS, A GATHERING PLACE FOR THE COMMUNITY, QUIETLY POSSESSING A SENSE OF DESPAIR COUPLED WITH DIGNITY, THE TABLES POPULATED WITH LAID OFF FACTORY WORKERS OR MINERS. THE PACE WOULD BE SO LAID BACK I WOULD HAVE LONG, NONCOMMITTAL POLITICAL DEBATES AND BENIGN CONVERSATIONS ABOUT THE WEATHER WITH CUSTOMERS

NO SUCH LUCK. MY PARTICULAR DONUT SHOP WAS LOCATED BENEATH THE GLASS TOWERS OF THE FINANCIAL DISTRICT. WHILE I SOLD COFFEE FOR MINIMUM WAGE, MEN IN SUITS WERE LIGHTING CIGARS WITH MY FRIENDS SAVINGS, SITTING AROUND A GLEAMING OAK CONFERENCE TABLE ON THE FORTIETH FLOOR OF A NEARBY BUILDING, DEVISING NEW TACTICS TO LURE US FURTHER INTO DEBT

EVERY CITY HAS THESE SAME CANYONS OF GLASS. BY DAY THE

STREETS OVERFLOW WITH HURRIED PEDESTRIANS, BIKE MESSENGERS AND THE CARS THAT OPEN THEIR DOORS ON THEM. BY NIGHT THE ONLY SOUND IS THE OCCASIONAL SPINNING OF SKATEBOARD WHEELS. KIDS FLY OFF MARBLE STAIRWELLS OR RUN FROM GREY HAIRED SECURITY GUARDS. HOMELESS MEN WORK METHODICALLY THROUGH THE GARBAGE CANS, LOOKING FOR POP CANS AND OTHER TREASURES. THE OFFICE BUILDING LIGHTS TURN BLACK ONE BY ONE AS CLEANING STAFF WORK THEIR WAY THROUGH DISPOSING OF MOUNTAINS OF SHREDDED PAPER.

I CAN BARELY EXPLAIN THE SLOW POUR OF A GRAVEYARD SHIFT. CUSTOMERS CAME AT THREE HOUR INTERVALS, AND I SAT READING, DESPERATELY TRYING TO FILL OUT THE HOLLOW HOURS. STARING OUT THE WINDOW I WATCHED PATTERNS OF WHITE AND BLACK FORMING AND DISOLVING AS SNOW FELL OVER THE CITY. I SERVED CABBIES WITH SKIN THE COLOUR OF TWO HOUR OLD COFFEE, AND COPS WITH SKIN LIKE SUGAR COVERED RASPERRY DONUTS. REGARDLESS OFF CREED OR CLASS, WE ALL USE COFFEE TO BEAT UP THE NIGHT.

BACK ON THE DAY SHIFT A SECURITY CAMERA HAD BEEN INSTALLED. I BEGAN TO WONDER WHERE MY IMAGE WAS BEING BROADCAST. WAS IT JUST ON THE

CLOSED CIRCUIT T.V. IN THE MANAGER'S OFFICE? COULD THE SIGNAL BE SENT TO THE OWNER'S HOUSE? HEAD OFFICE? WAS MY IMAGE BEING DIGITISED AND MY ACTIONS SHOWN ON SOME OBSCURE WEBPAGE WATCHED BY THE WORLD'S BORED AND IDLE? WAS I UNWITTINGLY BEING TURNED INTO A SERIES OF ONES AND ZEROS, FLICKERING ON AND OFF?

MY PARANOIA GREW DAILY, AND SUNDAR BECAME MY SOUNDING BOARD. "SUNDAR," I SAID, AS WE RAPIDLY TRIED TO CLEAN IN A RARE PERIOD OF CALM. "DO YOU THINK WE CAN CHART SOCIETY'S DECLINE THROUGH ARCHITECTURE?" I STUCK A METAL PIPE CLEANER KNOWN AS 'THE SNAKE' UP A COFFEE MAKER AND PUSHED AND PULLED ON IT VIGOUROUSLY.

"FIRST THE TALLEST BUILDINGS WERE CHURCHES, TOTALLY REPRESSIVE BUT AT LEAST BASED ON SOME IDEAL OF HOPE. NEXT CAME THE SMOKESTACKS OF THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION, A SYMBOL OF MINDLESS WORK. AND NOW THE TALLEST BUILDINGS BELONG TO THE DEBT MONGERS; THE FUCKING BANK TOWERS.

HE STARED BLANKLY. "YOU'RE WRONG. THE TALLEST STRUCTURES THESE DAYS ARE T.V. BROADCAST TOWERS."

I CROSSED THE LAURIER BRIDGE TWICE DAILY, ONCE TO WORK AND ONCE TO FREEDOM CROSSING IN THE

MORNING, I NOTED THE COLOUR OF THE SKY AND THE WATER LEVEL OF THE CANAL. EVERY DAY THE CLOCK OF THE PEACE TOWER INFORMED ME HOW LATE I WAS FOR WORK BUT SOMETIMES THE WORLD WAS SWALLOWED BY A THICK VEIL OF SPRING, AND THIS MORNING IT COMPLETELY ERASED THE PARLIAMENT BUILDINGS FROM THE SKYLINE. STARING INTO NOTHING, I SCRAWLED IN MY NOTEBOOK, "LET'S BRING DOWN THE GOVERNMENT ONE FOGGY SIX A.M. AT A TIME, LET'S ERASE THE GOVERNMENT FROM OUR OWN FOGGY MINDS.

DON'T ASK ME HOW WE DID IT, SIX PEOPLE IN CHRIS' TINY TWO DOOR, PLUS OUR INSTRUMENTS INCLUDING A CELLO. BUT AT THIS POINT OUR CRAMPED TRAVELING CONDITIONS WERE THE LEAST OF OUR WORRIES. THE CLOUDLESS EVENING SKY DEGENERATED INTO A FURIOUS MARCH BLIZZARD. THE FIRST FLAKES BEGINNING AS WE PASSED A BATTERED BLUE SIGN WISHING US 'BIENVENUE A QUEBEC.'

THE STRINGS BUZZ, ESPECIALLY THE G. IT'S LONG NECK IS GRACED BY STICKERS OF TINY VICTORIAN CHERUBS WITH FULLS CHEEKS AND CROWNS OF ROSES BETWEEN THE FRETS. BUT THE ANGELS HAVE ALL TURNED BLACK DUE TO CONSTANTLY BEING SUD OVER BY FILTHY HANDS. IT'S RED BODY IS INVISIBLE UNDER A LAYER OF STICKERS OF SLOGANS

AND BANDNAMES, THE OLDEST DATING BACK A DECADE

NERVOUSLY SITTING IN SHOTGUN AS THE ROAD BECAME INVISIBLE BEHIND A WALL OF WHITE, I LAY CHRIS' BASS ACROSS MY LAP, PEELING OFF THE STICKERS TO OCCUPY MY HANDS. WHEN I GIVE UP ONLY A FEW SINGLE WORDS STUBBORNLY REMAIN: KILL, PEACE, URANUS.

"I HATE HER," SYLVIA GLARES AT THE BASS FROM THE BACKSEAT.

"YOU DON'T FUCK YOUR OLD GIRLFRIEND WHEN YOUR NEW LOVER IS IN THE ROOM," SHE YELLED AT CHRIS WHEN HE TUNED OUT AND NOODLED ON, THE BASS IN THE BASEMENT OF HIS MOTHER'S HOUSE. THEY WERE TEEN LOVERS, HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUTS WHO WERE COMPLETELY STUPID OVER EACH OTHER.

I LAUGHED NERVOUSLY, I WAS THE REAL 'OLD GIRLFRIEND', A RELIC FROM CHRIS' DAYS AS A DUMB PUNK. BUT OF ALL THE DUMB PUNKS SYLVIA THOUGHT I WAS THE SMARTEST.

WE WALKED HOME FROM THE BUS STOP TOGETHER AT THREE A.M. SYLVIA WAS STILL EIGHTEEN, SO UNTIL HER BIRTHDAY WE EITHER SPENT OUR WEEKENDS AT UPSCALE COCKTAIL LOUNGES THAT NEVER BOTHERED TO I.D., OR ACROSS THE RIVER IN HULL, A MECCA OF UNDERAGE DRINKING. THAT NIGHT I DANCED AROUND TO POP MUSIC AT ONE OF THE TRASHIER BARS ON THE HULL STRIP, ALWAYS JUST

TWO STEPS AWAY FROM GETTING STABBER

"HEY SYL," I PAUSED TRYING TO FIGURE OUT THE PHRASING AS WE WALKED FURTHER DOWN WITHROW STREET. "YOU WOULDN'T HAPPEN TO PLAY ANY MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS BY ANY CHANCE?"

"OH GOD, OF COURSE NOT!"

"NUH UH, WHAT ABOUT YOUR FLUTE?" CHRIS INTERJECTED.

"THAT THING? I HAVEN'T EVEN CLEANED OUT THE SPIT VALVE IN THREE YEARS," SYLVIA SAID.

"WANNA BE IN OUR BAND?" I SPAT OUT, FINALLY.

"UH... OH... AH, O.K." SHE SAID YES AND THREE STREETLAMPS EXPLODED. CHRIS SMILED IN A WAY I HADN'T SEEN IN MONTHS. HIS OLD AND NEW LIVES WERE SUDDENLY COMING TOGETHER IN A WAY HE NEVER IMAGINED

SYLVIA WAS WRONG ABOUT ONE THING, THOUGH. THE SMARTEST DUMB PUNK WAS TOPS, WHO WAS ALSO THE MOST HANDSOME. BUT THAT WAS OKAY HE WAS IN OUR BAND TOO, WE WERE THE FREAKS AND WE HAD FOUND EACH OTHER AT LAST. OUR LIVES AND PROBABLY THE WHOLE WORLD SUCKED. BUT WHO CARES?

AS THE GREAT CRITIC OF OUR TIME ONCE WROTE, THE POINT OF ROCK N ROLL "IS TO SAY, THERE IS NO TIME LEFT. FUCK THE RULES, FUCK EVERYTHING, - LET'S JUST MAKE SOMETHING HUGE AND LOUD, AND BEAUTIFUL, BEFORE THERE'S

NOTHING ELSE.'"

"AW, LOOK AT THE PRETTY SNOW," SYLVIA PIPED UP AFTER TEN MINUTES OF COMPLETE SILENCE IN THE CAR.

"HEY CHRIS, NO PRESSURE EH?" TOPS INTONED FROM THE BACK SEAT AFTER NOTICING THE SHEEN OF SWEAT ACROSS OUR DRIVER'S FOREHEAD. EVEN IN TWENTY BELOW TOPS WORE A SLEEVELESS T-SHIRT REVEALING HIS TATTOO OF THE VEGAN SYMBOL SURROUNDED BY THE SLOGAN "STILL DOING IT FOR THE ANIMALS." WE SLOWED TO FORTY KILOMETERS PER HOUR AND THE CAR BEGAN TO RATTLE IN THE WIND.

"YOU'RE DOING FINE, JUST KEEP YOUR EYES ON THE ROAD," I SAID, "WHAT YOU CAN SEE OF IT," I ADDED UNDER MY BREATH.

CHRIS' KNUCKLES WERE WHITE AS THE SNOW, AS HE SHOWED A RARE CONCENTRATION BEHIND THE WHEEL. DRIVING WAS RARELY HIS NUMBER ONE PRIORITY. SOMEHOW RUMMAGING FOR HIS PACK OF SMOKES, TELLING A STORY WITH HAND GESTURES, OR FASTFORWARDING THE TAPE DECK TO THE SONG HE NEEDED TO HEAR ALWAYS TOOK PRECEDENT OVER WHETHER HIS PASSENGERS LIVED OR DIED. IT WAS THIS CARPE DIEM SCHOOL OF DRIVING THAT YIELDED A SERIES OF DARING STUNTS: U-TURNS, RED LIGHT RUNS, AND BUMPER TAPPING HIT AND RUNS

WHICH INVARIABLY TOOK PLACE AMIDST RUSH HOUR TRAFFIC.

CHRIS DID FAR TOO MUCH ACID IN HIGHSCHOOL, HE DROPPED EVERY SCHOOL DAY FOR TWO YEARS, AND SOMETIMES IT'S HARD TO IGNORE. ONE DAY I WOKE HIM FOR BAND PRACTICE, AS PLANNED I WAS AT HIS DOOR NOON SHARP. HE RELUCTANTLY DRAGGED HIS BLACK CLAD CARCASS OUT OF BED AND PUT ON HIS 'I'M WAY TO TIRED TO FIGURE OUT HOW TO PUT IN MY CONTACTS' GLASSES. WE SETTLED IN TO OUR CUSTOM OF SOBERING UP, READING THE NEWSPAPER BEFORE BAND PRACTICE.

"DUDE, DO YOU WANT TOAST? I DEFINITELY NEED TOAST," HE STARED AT THE BAG OF WHITE BREAD IN HIS RIGHT HAND FOR HALF A MINUTE, COMPLETELY PERPLEXED, BEFORE TEARING THE PLASTIC BAG STRAIGHT DOWN THE SIDE, TRIUMPHANTLY GRABBING TWO SLICES. APPARENTLY TWIST TIES WERE TOO HIGH CONCEPT FOR SO EARLY IN THE AFTERNOON.

"ARE WE THERE YET? I GOTTA PEE." TYKE SPEAKS UP.

FINDING SHELTER UNDER A GAS STATION'S ROOF, WE HUDDLE TOGETHER FOR WARMTH, CHRIS, SYLVIA, TYKE, CLIFF, TOPS, AND ME. INSIDE THE SMALL CONVENIENCE STORE A BORED ATTENDANT STARES AT US AS WE PASS OFF THE BATHROOM KEY TO THE NEXT PERSON LIKE A RELAY BATTON, BUT

SOON HE LOSES INTEREST IN US AND WATCHES THE SNOW DANCE IN THE WIND UNDER THE PHOSPEROUS HIGHWAY LAMPS.

"EVERYONE'S LEGS STRETCHED? FEELIN' NIMBLE? FEELIN'... GOOD? CHRIS ASKED.

DODGING DEATH ALREADY, AND IT WAS ONLY OUR FIRST ROAD TRIP I ADMIT IT SEEMED LIKE A LOT OF WORK, SPENDING EVERY SUNDAY FOR A YEAR BANGING OUT OUR SONGS, JUST TO BE KILLED BY SNOW ON THE 417 TO MONTREAL. IT WOULDN'T BE THE FIRST TIME DISASTER STRUCK.

"I GOT DOORED BIKING THROUGH CHINATOWN. I'M ALL FUCKED UP." HE ADMITTED WITH A SLUR. I JUMPED ON MY BIKE AND HEADED TO CLIFF'S HOUSE, IMAGINING THIND SHARDS OF WOOD AND A MESS OF HORSE HAIR STRINGS STREWN ACROSS SOMERSET STREET.

WEEK AFTER WEEK WE BIKED TO PRACTICE TOGETHER SINGING TO EACH OTHER AS WE WEAVED THROUGH TRAFFIC. AS LUCK HAD IT TODAY HE WASN'T BIKING WITH HIS CELLO SLUNG OVER HIS SHOULDER. ALTHOUGH LUCK ISN'T A WORD TO USE WHEN YOU SEE YOUR FRIEND SHIVERING, STILL IN SHOCK, WITH A FRESH HALF CAST OVER HIS RIGHT HAND.

THE WAIT FOR CLIFF'S RE-SUPERATION FELT LIKE FOREVER. EVEN WHEN YOUR BAND SUCKS IT

SOMEHOW MANAGES TO BECOME THE BEST THING IN YOUR LIFE. NOTHING IS BETTER THAN MOVING AIR WITH YOUR COLLAPSING AMPS. IN A BAND YOU START OUT AS FRIENDS, BUT AS YOU WORK YOU BECOME SOMETHING ELSE. CO-WORKERS? DANCE PARTNERS? YOU WORK HARD, YOU MOVE TOGETHER, YOU SPEAK IN YOUR OWN SECRET LANGUAGE.

THE SNOW SUBSIDED BUT A PURPLE SKY REMAINED AS WE PULLED INTO THE CITY AN HOUR LATE. WE MANAGED TO FIND A PARKING SPOT DIRECTLY IN FRONT OF THE CLUB, ON RUE DUROCHER, RIGHT IN THE BLACK HEART OF THE STUDENT GHETTO. CLIFF GRABBED ME AND THREW ME INTO A SNOWBANK. "IT'S SPRING."

"YOU'RE ALIVE," JB CONGRATULATED US. HE WAS JUBILANT GREETING US AT THE DOOR AND MONTIONING FOR US TO FOLLOW HIM, AND WE ALL CLIMBED INTO A TINY ELEVATOR WHICH LURCHED UPWARDS. WHEN IT CAME TO A REST HE LEAD US DOWN THE HALL TO A DOOR WITH A YELLOW FLYER DUCT TAPED TO IT. IT READ: 'CE SOIR: S.C. L.P. (D'OTTAWA) @ THE PHARAOH'S TOMB. POUR TOUS/ ALL AGES.'

A SMALL BATTALION OF PUNKS AND CREATIVE WRITING STUDENTS HAD GATHERED IN JB'S TINY APARTMENT, DUBBED 'THE PHAROAH'S TOMB' FOR THIS ONE

NIGHT ONLY. THE HUNDRED KIDS LOOKED ANXIOUS FOR THE SHOW TO START, YET COMPLETELY INDIFFERENT AT THE SAME TIME. WE SET UP IN RECORD TIME, I GRABBED THE MICROPHONE AND LOOKED AROUND THE ROOM.

"CHECK, CHECK. I HEARD ONCE THAT THERE ARE TWO KINDS OF STORIES IN THIS WORLD. ONE WHERE THE HERO GOES AWAY AND THEN COMES BACK, THATS A COMEDY. AND ONE WHERE THE HERO GOES AWAY AND NEVER COMES BACK. THATS TRAGEDY." SOMEONE COUGHED, I WAS RAMBLING.

"WELL, I'VE BEEN UP AND DOWN THE ROAD MANY TIMES, BUT AS HARD AS I TRY I CAN NEVER GIVE UP ON GOING HOME," BEHIND ME TYKE TESTED HIS SNARE DRUM, "I GUESS THIS IS A COMEDY, SO LAUGH IT UP MOTHERFUCKERS!"

I BEGAN SINGING A CAPPELA "A CITY OF LIGHTBULBS ADRIFT ON A SEA OF BLACK/ ILLUMINATED TRIDENTS AND SIDEWALK CRACKS," BEFORE EVERYONE ELSE JOINED IN.

epilogue

I SPENT THE BETTER PART OF MY YOUTH IN AND AROUND THESE BUSHES. TAKING MIDNIGHT PICNICS WITH MASON JARS FULL OF WHAT I COULD SIPHON FROM MY DAD'S BOX OF RED WINE. EXPLORING STORM DRAINS FILLED WITH CAT SIZE GRAIN FED RATS. FUCKING DOWN BY THE CREEK A FEW FEET FROM ALL SIX LANES OF BASELINE ROAD, BUT WELL HIDDEN BY A GROVE OF PINE TREES.

"I HOPE MY ASS DOESN'T GET WET" SAYS EVE AS I LEAD HER FURTHER INTO THE UNDERBRUSH. WE STUMBLE UPON A THICK TIRE BUILT FOR A BIG RIG, AND SIT DOWN. I POP OPEN A BOTTLE OF CHAMPAGNE LEFT OVER FROM MY BIRTHDAY PARTY. EVE TAKES THE FIRST SIP AND IT FIZZES UP INTO HER EYES.

"I TOLD YOU I HATE WINE."

I RELUCTANTLY APOLOGISE AS SHE TAKES ANOTHER HAUL. A FEW YEARS BACK THIS LOT OF LAND, A COUPLE FOOTBALL FIELDS LONG, WAS RAZED OF ALL LIFE. TREES TORN DOWN, WILDFLOWERS MOURD AND NO DOUBT ALL TIRE DRINKING SPOTS DESTROYED.

I LOOK AT EVE. IT'S BEEN YEARS SINCE SHE WAS MY GIRL. WE MADE OUT IN HER BEDROOM EVERY DAY OF MARCH BREAK, LISTENING TO TINNY MIXTAPES AS MY HAND WORKED IT'S WAY FURTHER UP HER SHIRT SHE SIGHED "WHY DO I ALWAYS FALL FOR GOYIM?" BACK THEN SHE WANTED TO BE A RABBI WHEN SHE GREW UP, WHIC ENTAILED MARRYING A GOOD JEWISH BOY BUT THEN HERE WE WERE, WITH OUR SHIRTS OFF.

HER NEIGHBOURHOOD WAS ON THE FRINGED, THE ISOLATED BUFFER SEPARATING CITY FROM COUNTRY. OUTSIDE FRESHLY PLANTED EVERGREENS SHUDDERED AS THE LAST WINDS OF WINTER BLEW THEMSELVES OUT.

EVERY AFTERNOON SHE WALKED ME TO THE BUS STOP AS IT SNOWED. "LISTEN YOUR BUS IS GOING TO CRASH, IT'S JUST WAY TOO SNOWY OUT. I CAN FEEL IT," SHE WAS PANICKING, "WHY DON'T YOU STAY HERE TONIGHT? MOM WILL LET YOU SLEEP ON THE COUCH."

WE ARGUED ABOUT MY IMPENDING DEATH UNTIL THE BUS FINALLY CAME. I KISSED HER.

GOODBYE AS SHE POUTED. I YELLED BACK "IF I DIE, PRINT MY FANZINE FOR ME," IT WAS MY FIRST ISSUE. IT WAS SPRING, ALMOST. THERE WAS SOMETHING STIRRING IN THE AIR AND IN MY HEART, THAT I'D NEVER FELT BEFORE. I WAS SIXTEEN.

THE SUN IS SETTING THROUGH THE TREES AND PO WERLINES TO THE WEST, THE LIGHT REFLECTS IN THE COLLEGE BUILDINGS IN THE DISTANCE SOON THE SUN WILL BE BUT A STRIP OF BLOOD ORANGE PULLED TIGHT AGAINST THE HORIZON LIKE THE RIM OF A DRUM.

EVE PASSES THE BOTTLE AND WE BEGIN DISSECTING OUR SEX LIVES AND DESCRIBING OUR BROKEN HEARTS, HERS BEING THE MOST RECENT SHE LAPSES INTO TEARS. I AWKWARDLY HANG MY ARM OVER HER ONCE FAMILIAR BODY AND I CAN FEEL HER CHEST SUCKING IN AND OUT. MY EYES ARE WARM WITH WINE AND I TAKE IN HER SMELL AND FEEL HER HAIR AGAINST MY CHIN AS SHE LEANS INTO ME.

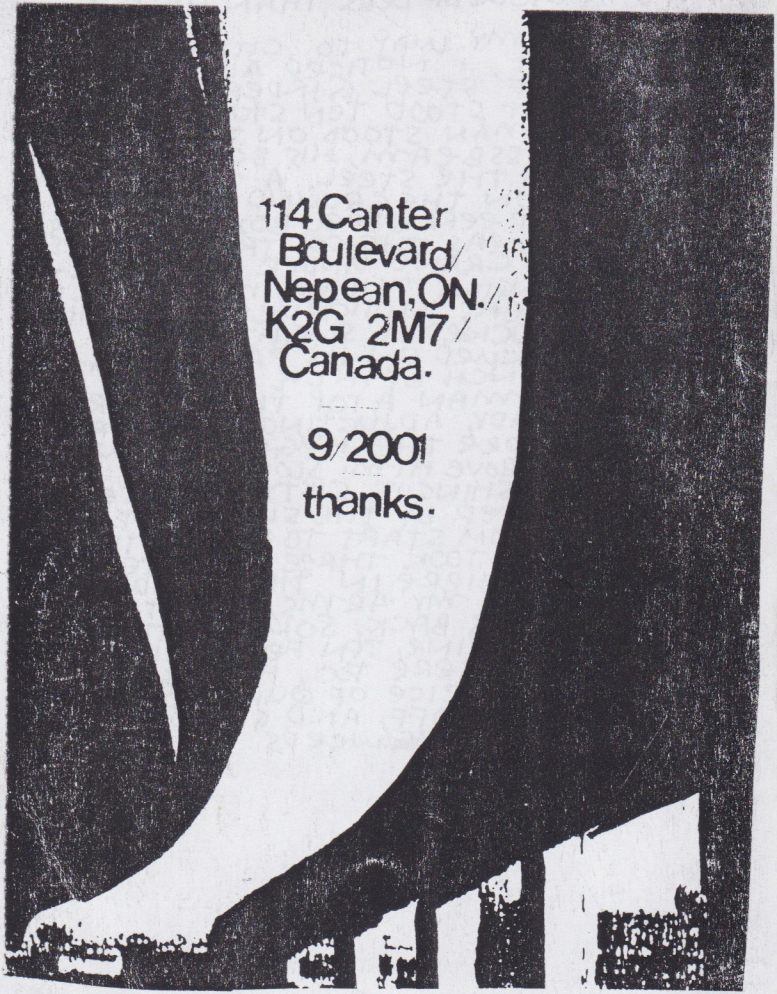
THIS YEAR THE SUBURB WE GREW UP IN WAS AMALGAMATED INTO OTTAWA. BEHIND US SITS THE GHOST CITY HALL. NEXT TO IT STAND A PAIR OF TEN STORY BRAND NEW OFFICE TOWERS SIT VACANT. MONUMENTS TO THE REGION'S FEVERED HIGH TECH BUBBLE ECONOMY. THEY WERE BUILT, POPULATED WITH WORKERS, AND THEN VACATED AS THE BUBBLE BURST

A LIFE CYCLE OF LESS THAN HALF A DECADE.

ON MY WAY TO CITY HALL ONE NIGHT, I NOTICED A THIN TOWER OF STEEL GIRDERS PAINTED WHITE. IT STOOD TEN STORIES HIGH AND A MAN STOOD ON THE HIGHEST CROSSBEAM, HIS BELT FASTENED TO THE STEEL. A MOBILE CRANE ON THE GROUND RAISED A GIANT GREEN STEEL BOX TOWARDS HIM, IT WAS THE CONTROL BOOTH FOR THE CRANE UNDER CONSTRUCTION, HANGING MIDAIR, IT'S WHEELS AND LEVERS MOTIONLESS. A LIGHT BREEZE ROCKED IT SLIGHTLY, BUT IT CONTINUED ON IT'S PATH, PROGRESSING INCH BY INCH.

THE MAN ATOP THE TOWER STOOD READY, ADJUSTING HIS HARD HAT BEFORE THE HUGE CUBE WAS DIRECTLY ABOVE HIM. SLOWLY HE BEGAN PUSHING IT, SIXTY TONNES OF STEEL GUIDED BY THE SLIGHTEST TOUCH. FROM START TO FINISH THE OPERATION TOOK THREE MINUTES.

BACK HERE IN THE FIELD WITH EVE IN MY ARMS, THE TREES ARE GROWING BACK. SOME OF THEM ARE EVEN NINE, TEN FEET TALL. AND WE'RE HERE TOO, HIDING IN THIS LITTLE PEICE OF QUIET SOBBING ON AND OFF, AND GROWING WITH THE ~~TREES~~ WEEDS.



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thanks.